Young people's development of agency: Explored from their perspectives on everyday school life

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore young people's development of agency in relation to their everyday school life. In the article, I present empirical examples of how young people (15-16 years old) act in relation to contradictory structural conditions in the form of the expectations and demands on youth in school. I argue that, to gain knowledge about the various meanings of such conditions in young people's lives, it is necessary to employ concepts suitable for situated analysis of young people's narratives about everyday school life and the conflicts they face and act in relation to. Through such analysis I illustrate how young people in school are constantly engaged in complex, collective processes of prioritising and dealing with multiple considerations and the conflicts they experience. The young people's personal perspectives on conflicts situated in their conduct of everyday life represent a resource for developing situated knowledge about the personal meanings of structural conditions in relation to youth development.

Keywords
youth development, agency, conduct of everyday life, school, dialectics, conflicts, science from the standpoint of the subject

Introduction

In recent years, youth in Denmark has been in focus in politics as well as in research. Hence, the public approach to youth and especially the aspects of youth related to compulsory education has undergone several political reforms. The reforms place major ambitions and expectations on young people. One example

is the national goals for primary school in Denmark, enacted in 2012, emphasising the importance of enhancing and raising individual academic performance and learning outcomes, the importance of working with individual learning goals, and continuous assessments (Ministry of Education, Denmark, 2017). Additionally, political initiatives have been made in order to animate young people to move more quickly through education, to decide on career, and with it, make educational choices earlier. Concurrently, the possibility of having second thoughts on choices and for changing one's chosen educational path has been restricted (Danish Agency for Science and Higher Education, 2017). All in all, these many different political initiatives put a strain on youth in the form of the expectation that young people be determined, capable and steady. At the same time, young people face existential dilemmas in relation to being young. For instance, they are learning to live life in a different way, experiencing huge transitions and transformations and are simultaneously expected to develop self-determination (Mørch, 1996). How should contradictions of this nature be understood?

One strand of research contends that youth wellbeing is jeopardised due to the mentioned societal demands and restrictions on youth, consequently leading to severe personal struggle and suffering (Center for Youth Research, 2010). For instance, research shows that an increasing amount of young people – mainly girls – is struggling with mental health issues, such as stress and eating disorders (Waaddegaard, 2002, Ottosen et al., 2014), self-harming, anxiety (Møhl, 2006) and other health matters (Nielsen, Sørensen & Osmec, 2010). Another strand of research shows that the quite contradictory expectations young people face lead to increasing individualisation (Katznelson, 2006) and exclusion in primary school (Henze-Pedersen, Dyssegaard, Egelund & Nielsen 2016).

This article focuses on common dilemmas in relation to being young in the effort to explore everyday school life and the common dilemmas associated with it from a group of young people's perspectives. The aim is to learn about what activities and common dilemmas and conflicts the young people are engaged in and how they act in order to deal with the contradictories in everyday life. The empirical material derives from a study anchored in a compound practice research project. The aim of the overall research project was to create knowledge about conflicts in and about public schools in Denmark analysed from a variety of perspectives on inclusion and learning possibilities (Højholt & Kousholt, 2018). Using an exploratory design, I investigated what everyday school life was like for young people in a Copenhagen school class.[1] Some of the central questions addressed were: What matters to young people in ninth grade? What

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[1] This study is part of one of four sub-projects. For more details about the compound practice research project, see Højholt and Kousholt (2018).

conflicts do young people face and how do they act in various ways in relation to conflicts? The empirical data consisted of written notes from participatory observations during school days from 8 am to 4 pm conducted from the beginning of the school year (August 2015) to the final exams (May 2016). Additional empirical data included transcripts of 14 interviews with the ninth graders.[2]

Conceptualising youth

Erikson (1968/1992), who studies how to conceptualise youth and developmental issues in youth from a psychodynamic perspective, developed a stage theory for understanding the development of identity. In Erikson's theory, development is dependent on whether the person successfully handles an existential crisis in each stage. Every existential crisis leads to dualistic outcomes, such as trust/mistrust and confidence/disgrace. In the fifth stage, which encompasses adolescence, the possible developmental outcome is identity versus role confusion. Erikson emphasises that to prevent this stage from leading to a deviant outcome, no adult demands should be put on young people, thereby emphasizing the developmental significance of a moratorium. Erikson perceives the maturing body as the developmental drive, his theory opening up the discussion of development as exceeding the first three years of life. Erikson's theory also stresses the developmental importance of social relationships, with emphasis put on peer relationships and relations to society as important for youth development, for instance when role confusion is the result of not perceiving oneself as a contributing member of society. Thus, society is seen as superimposed from the outside, affecting individual development in universal ways, hence posing challenges to young people's agency and thus situated ways of dealing with the conflicts they face.

Mørch (1996), who also works conceptually with youth development from within a framework of social psychology, argues that young people's developmental task is to acquire *qualified self-determination*, which, according to Mørch (1996), is multifaceted and contradictory. The tasks for young people range from developing: 1) towards adapting to society by becoming active members of a democracy, which involves cultivating certain skills and knowledge in order to manage, e.g. a job and family; and 2) having disposal over one's life conditions by seeking influence and developing self-determination; for instance, by helping to organise the activities they participate in. Mørch (1996) maintains that school is an important context for supporting young people in the

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[2] There were 18 pupils (15-16 years old).

described developmental tasks, arguing that schools must prepare the young people for their future lives by educating them and working: "… to qualify them and equip them with the skills required for an adult work life" (p. 166, my translation). While Mørch's (1996) concepts contribute with important insights into what societal tasks the young people face, I wish to highlight the various *personal ways* of dealing with concrete structural conditions in their everyday life; thus, exploring how structural conditions are always embedded in the situated conduct of everyday life. This approach calls for an exploration of structural conditions from the young people's subjective perspectives. In order to access such perspectives, I will build on and refine concepts for understanding young people's development of agency in an attempt to understand how they act in relation to struggles and contradictions.

Theoretical framework

In an effort to overcome the mentioned dualisms between the individual and social, I take my analytical starting point in "psychology from the standpoint of the subject" (Holzkamp, 2013), which is anchored in cultural-historical research traditions emphasising the dialectical relationship between the individual and the social (e.g. Rogoff, 2003; Hedegaard & Chaiklin, 2005; Hviid, 2012). This analytical approach implies conceptualising the individuals in the school as participants in social practices, and the school as a historically and socially developed practice that comprises conditions for participation. The analysis addresses how these young people develop agency, and in this regard, how schooling as a socially and historically developed practice comprises an important everyday life context for youth development. The concept of agency is defined by Holzkamp (2013) as "the human capacity to gain, in cooperation with others, control over each individual's own life conditions" (p. 20). Hence, agency addresses the interrelationship between the individual and society.

One concept within the tradition of psychology from the standpoint of the subject that is fruitful for analysing the internal relations between personal meanings and structural conditions is the concept of the conduct of everyday life (Holzkamp, 2013; Dreier, 2016). Dreier (2011) states how the conduct of everyday life "involves persons coordinating their various obligations, relations, and activities with their various co-participants in various social contexts across the day" (p. 13). Further, Holzkamp (2013) states that the conduct of everyday life is "not an additional concept, superimposed from the outside, but the elementary form of human existence: there is no human being who is not situated within a scene of everyday life conduct" (p. 314).

The concept of the conduct of everyday life is fruitful for shedding light on the efforts people make in their endeavours to integrate and coordinate what are often quite diverse, conflicting and sometimes contradictory aspects of their shared and compound everyday life. For instance, young people participate in both social relations and activities during the school day, while simultaneously participating in academic activities. These goings-on often happen at the same time at school and involve multiple actions to integrate them, like when Miriam explained that she is on Facebook's Messenger while she does her math assignment because, as she says, math will still be there tomorrow.[3] However, the math teacher stressed that Miriam needed to work harder in order to achieve better results on the next test. Miriam does not want to risk missing out on virtual conversations about a party she and her friends went to if she puts her phone missing out on virtual conversations about a party she and her friends went to, if she puts her phone down to focus solely on the math assignment. This example shows how young people work hard to prioritise and coordinate contradictory activities and aspects of being young. Insights into the ways in which Miriam prioritises can illuminate how different aspects of her life can be hard for her to coordinate and integrate, and how she is dealing with these different, and somewhat contradictory aspects of her everyday life.

The next section will provide more insights into some of the major contradictions related to being young in primary school in Denmark that were mentioned earlier in the introduction.

Societal context for school and youth in Denmark

This section provides insight into a few societal landmarks that currently shape primary schools in Denmark and Europe. To be able to understand what is at stake in the Danish school, it is also necessary to look abroad at transnational policies.

OECD countries regard education as closely connected to financial goals because a highly educated workforce is regarded as a prerequisite for economic growth (Klitmøller & Sommer, 2015). As a result, during the 1990s, they began conducting transnational comparisons of pupils' academic level. The results from initial research on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA,

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[3] For instance, digital social media devices were present at all times when I participated in school classes, allowing the pupils to stay connected to social communities and activities with, e.g. previous classmates and boyfriends. One could of course discuss the implications for the young people's learning processes, but that is beyond the scope of this article. See, e.g. Schraube (in press), who examines digital technology and its implications for engagement in learning processes.

2009) indicated that the performance level of Danish school children was lower than that of other OECD countries. These results served as the basis for instigating legislative changes in Danish schools. Subsequently, Danish politicians emphasised that academic performance should be improved, leading to an increased focus on the individual assessment of performance (Kelly, Andreasen, Kousholt, McNess & Ydesen, 2017), as mentioned in the introduction. In the wake of this, much more detailed target management in teaching has become part of the everyday school life, leading to standardisation, individual categorisation and increased differentiation.[4]

During the 1990s the dominant discourse in Danish education policy was to ensure education for all (Katznelson, 2014). In 1994, Denmark joined the UNESCO Salamanca Statement on access and quality in the educational system, implying that inclusion was part of the school's core tasks, as well as enhancing the wellbeing of pupils in school (Røn Larsen, 2012).

Another political target in Denmark is that 95% of each cohort receives some kind of youth education, with more than half of them continuing with further education. The aim is not to just randomly educate people, but to give them the skills that lead straight to a job after graduation. These political aims have been followed up by research projects focusing on the effects of career guidance and retention strategies (Katznelson, Lundby & Hansen, 2016), and on how young people can be motivated to educate themselves beyond compulsory education (Grubb & Lazerson, 2006; Savelsberg, 2010). As a result, concepts such as career learning and guidance have become part of the school curriculum and hence also a part of the tasks young people regularly reflect on (Thomsen, 2015). Simultaneously, grade point averages required to be accepted into high school and other youth education programmes have gone up. In that way, individual assessment directly affects the future opportunities of young people in terms of education, leading to increased differentiation of students in primary school (Andresen & Hjörne, 2014; Langager, 2009).

Concurrently with the high expectations put on youth today, there is also a great amount of concern. A report by the Center for Youth Research (2010) shows that an increasing number of young people – mainly girls – are vulnerable and suffer from eating disorders, self-harming, anxiety and depression (Katznelson, 2014, p. 156). Other research identifies risk factors and develops interventions designed to prevent alcohol and drug abuse among youth (Ballegaard, Dieckmann & Buck, 2017). As a result, health promotion has also become an important aspect of youth policies in Denmark.

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[4] For a more detailed discussion of the meaning of assessments and standardised tests, see Pedersen, 2015 and Kousholt, 2016. This is also the case internationally (see Biesta, 2009).

The general image of young people in school created in public debates thus represents two, somewhat contradictory, sides. On the one hand, the image encompasses young people being expected to choose the right (educational) path early in life and doggedly pursue that path. On the other hand, the research and policy side of the image depicts a cohort where 20% fall through the cracks. Somewhat contradictory tasks derive from these two perspectives on youth and societal challenges for all primary school participants. For instance, research shows that school teachers experience dilemmas with coexistent and contradictory demands involving, e.g. inclusion, ensuring pupils' wellbeing and a simultaneous effort to raise academic outcomes (Troman, Jeffrey & Raggl, 2007).[5]

At this point I have accounted for two important, current issues concerning youth. The first one is that the core tasks of schools are defined based on many different, conflicting intentions and perspectives, and hence result in contradictory conditions for those participating in school. The second, is how the understanding of individual success, or the lack thereof, of young people is presented either as a matter of general risk factors or as a matter of individual vulnerability. In this regard conflicts and problems in young people's lives seem to occur in isolation from their everyday life conditions. The following analysis tries to challenge this by illustrating how the conflicts and problems young people face are reasoned within conditions situated in their everyday lives, including school.

Being a ninth grader – changes, transitions and contradictions

When I started the empirical work with the specific class of ninth graders in August 2015, the teacher and the students initially told me that during eighth grade, and especially ninth grade, the sense of community in the class had been affected by several changes. One important change, according to the young people, was that several classmates had dropped out and moved to other schools and that new students had joined the class. These changes meant that some of the pupils lost their best friends and that the sense of community in the class had become fragmentised. The young people problematized that these changes led to the development of smaller cliques. They further problematized that there was a lack of joint activities to unify the class and create and re-constitute social

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[5] Teachers in youth education experience similar paradoxes when coexisting political demands on teachers' work appear incompatible – for example, retention strategies and improved academic outcomes (Sachs, 2001).

relationships. One girl, Miriam, described the implications of the changed dynamics in an interview:

There has been a huge change in our class, with lots of new people starting, and also several of our old classmates changing schools. Actually, some of my really close friends … it kinda sucks ... and every time a new girl or boy starts, I think I should make an effort to make them feel welcome, but it's just (...) after a while you just don't bother anymore. … Now I just want to hang out with the people I know well … but I guess it can't be easy to start in our class.

The teachers told me that pupils changing schools at the end of primary school in Copenhagen is common, referring to the phenomenon as "school shopping", and that the increasing amount of young people experiencing problems in school was one of the reasons why.

Another important change the young people told me about can be understood as related to the recent years' increasing focus on assessments, individual performance and standardisation as leading to differentiation and problematic categorisations. The young people talked about how ninth grade felt like one long slog toward final exams. In interviews, they told me that all of their activities in and outside school were evaluated by themselves, parents and teachers in relation to the question of their being ready for high school after final exams; for instance, how the young people prioritised time spent on schoolwork compared to other activities, such as leisure time activities or hanging out with friends. Besides grades, the students' effort and how they approached their schoolwork were also being assessed (Krøjer & Helms, 2011). On the one hand, young people are expected to be determined, skilled and to steadily develop in a certain direction that prepares them to continue after primary school with a youth education programme. On the other hand, young people are also expected to develop self-determination and become more independent and capable of making the right choices.

When I participated in their class the young people mentioned the contradictory societal conditions that were evident in everyday school life in the form of regular visits from the local vocational guidance counsellor, tests, individual monitoring of one's performance, mock exams and other assessments but also surveys conducted by the school on pupils' individual wellbeing, followed up by individual sessions outside of class with a teacher designed to enhance the self-esteem and self-confidence of pupils identified as failing to thrive. Anxiety and edginess about living up to the many and somewhat contradictory expectations were widespread, especially among the girls in the class, who explained that she works constantly to meet academic requirements and keep up with ever-changing social constellations in the class. Groups and friendships from eighth grade altered in ninth grade, requiring new ways of

participating and staying informed about what was going on socially in and outside school. There was a lot to keep track of. During interviews several students mentioned how the changes seemed even more problematic due to the increasing focus on academic performance. Prior to the changes they used to help each other but know who to ask in the current situation was difficult and the students were leery about exposing themselves as having difficulties with math. This example illustrates how the social community serves as the context for academic content, including tests and other forms of assessment and group projects. In this way, the lack of familiarity with classmates also influenced the young people's learning opportunities and options for inclusion.

Miriam's narrative about the changes in the social dynamics shows that the new circumstances had not been easy for her. Newcomers also talked about how difficult it was to become a part of the class community. Even though the changes had different personal significance for the various students, Miriam's narrative was illustrative of a common problem since all of the students experienced the changes as challenging in different ways. According to one girl, Maria, who recently joined the class after moving from another side of the country, starting in the class was really hard and her new situation was deeply strenuous since it involved a change in her self-understanding in relation to being a participant in social communities. At her old school, she had many friends and was always hanging out with someone. It was a huge change for her to deal with herself as someone who was outside the group of girls and was only granted permission to remain as an exception. "No one talked to me and I just sat looking down at my phone, listening to what they talked about while staying in touch [via Facebook's Messenger] with my friends from the town I used to live in," she explained. Even though no one ever said that she was not allowed to hang out with them, she said, "I still feel like an outsider". Maria and Miriam's narratives illustrate, from two different positions, how the social community was pivotal for new as well as old students.

In the ninth grade, the school does not prioritise supporting the sense of community in the classroom as opposed to the beginning of primary school. Instead young people are considered old enough to independently deal with social interaction and the organisation of social activities. A study of pupils' perspectives on inclusion in Danish schools revealed that it is common for schools to reduce the time spent on social activities in favour of enhancing the academic level as the pupils become older (Henze-Pedersen, Dyssegaard, Egelund & Nielsen, 2016). The study problematized this, considering the coexisting demands on ensuring inclusion. The point is to illustrate how the social community is of great importance to young people and that continuous changes in a class community have both social and personal consequences, since

being a ninth grader means being involved in ending something together with someone familiar, while at the same time orienting oneself in relation to future new (educational) opportunities. The changes of the social dynamics, and lack of cohesiveness during this specific time of life, result in the lack of a familiar and safe community in which to handle the transitions.

The point is not to praise stability and to problematize changes as a principle. Changes can also enhance opportunities for inclusion of individuals with other ways of contributing to the social community that can serve to co-create new opportunities for everyone, which means change can productively lead to development (Dreier, 2008). However, the changes in the ninth grade take place simultaneously with the young people being in the midst of reorientation in relation to their changing lives and in relation to contradictory expectations. In this way, the changes involved increased uncertainty and tension. In this situation, the social changes become difficult and actualise the need for supporting the social community in class.

In the next section I will also show how the young people are engaged in relation to participating in the social community in the class.

Social community – dealing with contradictions

As illustrated above, the social community in the school class is crucial to helping young people cope with the personal and academic challenges they face. They need each other to share in the process of exploring what they want and what matters to them, and to develop their personal preferences and standpoints in relation to the communities in which they participate (Dreier, 2008). They share the activities of their everyday lives with each other, rather than their parents or other adults. The young people emphasised how imperative it is to have someone in the class to hang out with who shares their interests in music, clothes and leisure time activities.

Due to the changes in the social situation, several pupils emphasised the need for activities to reconstitute and unify the class. When I asked them how this could be done, they all independently mentioned that it would require a joint activity. According to them, joint activities create shared experiences and memories, which, as one girl explained, gave them "something to look back on and laugh about together afterwards".

When I took time to hang out with the various groups of young people in the class during breaks, I had the opportunity to learn about a group of girls who were struggling with how to deal with the fact that they, on the one hand, gathered to share their interest in dancing and listening to music and, on the

other, contribute quite differently to their shared activities. The concept of contradiction can help illuminate how participating in a community that is defined by the common conflicts and dilemmas of being young, combined with the various approaches to engaging in the common issues, can lead to conflicts in that community. When issues arose, some of the girls continued to focus on dancing and having fun together, while a few of them branched out to experiment with attending wild parties with older boys and friends. Even though the girls appeared to share engagements and be unified by the matter of how to be young and how to deal with living up to contradictory expectations, they approached the issue in highly divergent ways, leaving them torn as to how to engage in shared activities (Dreier, 2008). According to Ollman in Axel and Højholt (in press) contradiction refers to incompatible elements that are also dependent on one another. In other words, contradiction involves opposites that are mutually dependent on one another. The young people need each other in order to develop new ways of conducting their lives, but their various ways of engaging in this common endeavour can also tear them apart from one another.

In the breaks, the group of girls spent all their time together getting ready for parties by looking on the internet for the right clothes to wear, tagging each other on pictures of dresses, shoes and much more. This mainly took place during school hours (often in class). During breaks, they sat on their desks in a circle with their heads close together listening to music on one girl's phone. They discussed where to go, where to meet and how to get around age restrictions. After a couple of months, the girls disagreed about whether to prioritise having fun together or getting to know new people (boys) at the parties. One of the girls in the group, Sarah, preferred to spend time with the girls and did not want to get very drunk or to chase after boys. At one point Sarah did not want to go to the parties anymore, though she still wanted to be in the group:

> Sarah: Sometimes when the others ask if we're going to a party, I'll ask my mother in advance to call me on the phone and tell me that I am not allowed to go … even if I am.
> I: Why?
> Sarah: Because then I don't have to say to my friends that it's because I don't *want* to go.
> I: Why do you prefer that they not know that you don't *want* to?
> Sarah: Because then I might not be considered as one of the group.

This excerpt from the interview with Sarah (15 years old) reveals how important being part of the group was for her. Being part of the group was crucial in order to orient herself in relation to how to be young. She needed to be with her friends in order to deal with life as a youth. Sarah liked one specific group of girls and

their focus on music and clothes. Being in the group, however, meant having to do and like the same things, leaving little room for different ways of contributing to the shared activities. These differences seemed to split the girls from each other, rather than contributing to creating a diverse community. Schwartz and Højholt (in press), who conducted a similar study on young people's everyday life in school, show that an important process for young people is learning how to include different ways of contributing to a diverse community. When participants act in various ways in relation to the community and common engagements, they in turn contribute to developing the community and expanding opportunities for action for all of the different participants.

In order to deal with this dilemma – wanting to be part of the group but not wanting to go to parties – Sarah involved her mother to absolve herself of the responsibility of saying no and of revealing why. In that way, Sarah was dealing with developing what Mørch (1996) conceptualises as self-determination by involving her mother and asking for a 'no'.

Youth development situated in the conduct of everyday life

When Sarah involved and collaborated with her mother in the process of developing self-determination, she dealt with the contradictions and potential conflict in relation to participating in the community with the girls. Her way of involving her mother in the development of self-determination, challenged the understanding of youth as a matter of seeking autonomy or of being in opposition to and not needing parents and other adults. What Sarah was doing was not unambiguously seeking autonomy, as in her being able to act independently of others. In asking her mother to say no, Sarah was actively taking part in her own self-determination. By getting her mother take responsibility for saying no and for being the reason Sarah cannot go to the party, Sarah was absolved from confronting her friends about what she preferred and did not jeopardize the group of friends and its sense of community, but simultaneously avoided participating in parties she was not that comfortable with. The agreement with her mother was an important resource for Sarah, providing her with the opportunity to change her way of participating, thus developing her social self-understanding in relation to the community.

Understanding Sarah's perspective made it possible to recognise the differences between the young people's way of prioritising and dealing with the shared engagements. What the young people did together did not necessarily entail the same meaning for them, but their different contributions to the shared activities, and their different perspectives on what was happening, were the

feature that helped them to develop. Pedersen's (2015; Pedersen & Bang 2016) analysis of how young people develop their subjectivity in the transition from elementary school to high school and how this transition involves encountering new standards for what young people 'ought to be like' in high school emphasises precisely the need for concepts capable of grasping the *variety* in relation to understand youth developmental processes. This is similar to the various ways that the 'party girls' took part in the group and that these various ways led to a potential conflict, almost tearing them apart from each other, even though they needed each other to conduct their shared everyday life.

Through Sarah and the other girls' varied contributions they were developing social self-understanding in relation to the common activities and communities they took part in. Sarah does not need her mother's support in the same way as when she was younger but she still needs her to be there for her in a different way. As a result, the distribution of mutuality, expectations and responsibility changes in the child-adult relationship as children grow older (Højholt, Kousholt & Juhl, 2017).

Young people involve not only their parents in their development of agency and self-determination, but also their teachers play an important role. Group work often involves problems and conflicts about how to work together and how and what joint tasks to prioritise. When the young people involved their teacher in their problems and conflicts, they wanted help to solve their problems, but they did not want the teacher to dictate a solution. The outcome was that they took more responsibility for solving their problems and they involved their teacher more as an equal partner to discuss solutions with. Similarly, the teacher also talked about episodes when he did not have an answer or could not come up with a good way to solve the conflicts, pointing out that a fruitful discussion took place involving a mutual exploration of possible solutions. Haavind (1987) see this the increasing mutuality between adults and children as part of the developmental process.

The next section further addresses how the young people actively tried to get the school and its adults engaged in dealing with their developmental processes and contradictory life conditions.

Christmas conflict – an example of agency

The following excerpt is from my observation notes taken one morning just before the school day was about to begin. This particular day differed from ordinary school days, since it was December first, which is when the entire school usually is involved in making Christmas decorations.

The young people gather in the classroom. Several of them have brought templates and scissors. On the other side of the hall, Christmas songs are already playing loudly from another classroom and can be heard in the hallway. The young people explain to me that an annual tradition at the school is that there is no teaching during the first two lessons on December first. Instead the whole school makes Christmas decorations, listens to Christmas songs and eats Christmas cookies. Shortly afterwards, the math teacher enters the classroom. He looks tiredly at the young people, who obviously had something else besides math planned that morning. The teacher asks the young people to find their books and put the Christmas paraphernalia aside. They protest loudly, complaining about how they had looked forward to this day for a long time. The teacher refuses to give in and explains that they soon have exams and that they are a long way from reaching the learning objectives. After a while the young people reluctantly find their books. Meanwhile, the teacher tells them that they need to get used to the fact that being a ninth grader is not a walk in the park and that they better get prepared to go to high school soon (Observation notes, Tuesday 1 December 2015, 8:10 am).

One of the girls, Amanda, who had passionately protested cancelling the Christmas activities, explained to me that this event could have created just the kind of common unifying experience they needed. Amanda and some of the other young people explained that Christmas activities were perfect because they allowed them to decide on the content themselves. And just as important, the school initiated and supported the activities. This was significant because as the young people explained, it would make it possible for them to avoid a situation in which they put themselves at stake in case the event flopped because no one wanted to join in. A key factor for them was not being left alone with the responsibility. I stated the obvious when I suggested that they essentially participated in nothing but joint activities all day long at school. For instance, they all had the same math class. The young people indulgently explained to me that being able to influence the content of an event was vital. Seen from the perspective of the teacher, the young people's protests in the wake of cancelling the Christmas fun appeared childish. He saw making Christmas decorations as an excuse to avoid doing academic schoolwork.

This study, however, analyses the young people's engagement in relation to doing Christmas decorations as related to the structural changes in the social dynamics of the class. Relating structural changes and personal engagement made it possible to understand the conflict and the ninth graders' participation as a way of trying to deal with the new situation and to change it by doing something together, i.e. by trying to re-constitute and unify the class as a social practice. From the young people's perspective, and seen in relation to the

structural changes, engagement in doing Christmas decorations did not seem to be reasoned as a movement away from something (i.e. their academic programme), but rather as an effort to co-constitute the class community as a context for academic and social activities. They needed each other and the social community in order to deal with the existential challenges related to being young and conducting their lives in new ways to help each other develop opportunities for action in a changing and contradictory life.

According to Mørch's (1996) concept of qualified self-determination, the young people's interest in doing Christmas decorations can be understood as an endeavour to try to influence their lives and the activities they participate in. Mørch's approach includes societal conditions in the understanding of youth development, making the psychology more worldly (Dreier, 2011). By including the concept of conduct of everyday life it is possible to take one step further in the attempt to include the personal and the social as mutually related in the analysis. In order to expand this argument, I return to my analysis of the conflict concerning Christmas decorations.

The young people's engagement in the activity cannot just be rejected as young people trying to avoid schoolwork and adults, or to seek autonomy. I propose that the young people were trying to take responsibility by attempting to make their everyday school life more coherent. They were eager to do this during school hours because they needed the school and its adults to be involved in problematic issues together with them and through this process, to develop self-determination, in accordance with Mørch's (1996) conceptualisation. Inspired by the concept of the conduct of everyday life (Holzkamp, 2013), I therefore suggest *co-determination* as a first step towards a more adequate term for understanding the collective processes of young people trying to deal with their structural conditions, as illustrated by the Christmas decoration conflict. As a second step, I suggest linking co-determination with *coordination* in an attempt to emphasise *how* the young people did not want to be controlled *by* adults, but rather they seemed eager to engage with school and its adults and each other in collective processes of co-organising and coordination; that is: they wanted to share responsibility with adults and other co-participants with whom they shared their conduct of everyday life (Holzkamp, 2013). However, they could not do this alone; they needed the support of the school and its adults. For the young people, social and academic activities were part of a coherent everyday school life and could not be separated, since their social life always comprises the context for the academic agenda. Even though the political focus, as mentioned earlier, is on both enhancing academic outcomes and on concerns about young people's wellbeing, the support of the young people's shared social life is often given low priority in the ninth grade, where academic performance is ranked higher. The

young people were left to deal with the challenges in relation to their social lives and contradictory life conditions, outside of school hours. They were considered old enough to organise events on their own. The point I wish to make is that youth development is not exclusively a matter of detachment from adults, or seeking autonomy and trying to escape adults. Rather young people are in much need of adults who are prepared to engage with them in processes of co-determination and coordination and to engage more mutually together with co-participants in dealing with common dilemmas. As a result, young people are in need of each other as well as adults who understand how social and academic qualifications are entangled and an important aspect of conducting a shared everyday life.

Conclusions

This study applied the concept of conduct of everyday life to shed light on young people's engagement and conflicts as anchored and reasoned in their concrete everyday lives and their shared but various ways of dealing with being young and navigating life's complexities, contradictions as well as existential dilemmas. The analysis illustrated how the young people were striving to make often very diverse and somewhat contrasting activities work in a coherent life.

I have illustrated how the societal expectations and demands on young people are numerous and often contradictory. Politicians want them to perform better than former generations and we want them to feel better than they do, so they can move more quickly and more confidently through the educational system. In other words, there is no room for second thoughts or experimenting. In different ways, the school, researchers and politicians all want to decide for young people. This stands in contrast to both Erikson's (1968/1992) idea of moratorium and Mørch's (1996) idea of the contradictory developmental task that involves both developing towards society's conditions in the sense of adapting, and at the same time aiming to develop self-determination, or as I suggest, co-determination and coordination of a complex and contradictory everyday life that involves processes of gathering as well as conflicts.

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