

The social world of children's homework.

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In a contemporary Danish context, most children and young people, as well as their teachers and parents, consider homework an integrated part of schooling. This article presents findings from a Danish research project: *Home-school co-operation as a cultural given* (a multi-sited ethnographic study financed by the Danish Research Councils and the Danish School of Education). This part of the study focuses on practices and narratives concerning experiences of, and attitudes to, homework among a number of children and their families in five different schools in four different areas of Copenhagen, encompassing three age-groups (5-6, 12-14, 15-16 years). The aim is to understand what homework means to the actors involved and how the children and their families cope with homework in their everyday lives.

Homework appears as a theme in a multitude of manners: in children's daily experiences with homework; as an issue between children and their families; and as a disciplining strategy imposed on families by the teachers. Even though the pupils did not enjoy homework as a concrete activity, they expressed a need for homework (or the imagination of homework) as a symbol of constructing themselves as schoolchildren/young people. Homework was seen as a burden, yet something unavoidable. In a future-life perspective, homework can be seen as socialisation to a labour-market depending on obligations and submissions, and as an extension of labour time into leisure and family life.

Keywords: Homework; Home-School Relations; Children's Everyday Lives

Homework in Denmark: a cultural given.

In a contemporary Danish context, most children and young people, as well as their teachers and parents, consider homework an integrated part of schooling. Most of these will agree that if you don't do your homework, you will not succeed in school. Homework has gained status of a cultural given.

Over the last three-four decades there have been several public debates on homework in Denmark and some of the strongest critiques of homework assignment – arguing for abolishing it or at least scaling it down - have been formulated within the movement for child-centred and reform pedagogy.

Especially in 1970s there was a strong movement parallel to the progressive movements in North America and Brazil (Canadian Council of Learning, 2009; de Carvalho, 2001). There are schools that – at least up to grade six – have a policy of not assigning any homework (Kryger & Ravn, 2009).

Those years' critical voices on homework are fading out. As Kryger and Ravn argue (2009), there is a renewed focus on homework and a retraditionalisation of educational policies in relation to the *Folkeskole*¹. In official documents from the Danish Ministry of Education there are several statements that local schools are encouraged to take sanctions and measures if homework is not carried out.

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¹ The *Folkeskole* is a comprehensive public school covering both primary and lower secondary school. It is financed by the State. There is nine years of compulsory education (not 'schooling') in Denmark. The term *Folkeskole* will be used in this article because it signifies a school with pupils from 5 to 17 years.

In a guideline from the Ministry of Education on "Discipline, decent behaviour, well-being in the *Folkeskole*" detention is recommended if a pupil has not done the homework:

The pupil has over and over again forgotten to make his homework because of absentmindedness or lack of time because of leisure activities. The pupil often comes too late to the lessons, and conversations with the pupil and the parents have had no influence. (Undervisningsministeriet [Ministry of Education] 2006, p. 19, authors' translation)

In general there is a growing number of official documents about disciplining and sanctioning pupils which are bound up with the present Danish neo-conservative 'back-to basics' movement, in which there is an implicit understanding that homework is linked to the idea of fixed and predictable goals for children's performances. Nevertheless the concept 'homework' is not mentioned in the law governing the Danish *Folkeskole*, and never has been. Even though the Ministry of Education continuously works out guidelines, assignments and inspirational material for an increasing number of themes and issues, it has never published any material to explain or understand, or to practise or make use of homework. This is remarkable if one observes that this coincides with homework gaining the status of an inevitable part of schooling.

Apparently homework is taken so much for granted in schooling that there is no need or demand for official definitions and guidelines, which leaves actors room to fill in meanings and practices regarding homework. This stimulates a research interest in Danish students', parents' and teachers' different perspectives, experiences and practices concerning homework and the consequences of homework for children's schooling and family life. Questions like the following suggest themselves: What does homework as a cultural given mean to the actors involved? And how do children and their families cope with homework in their everyday lives?

These questions will, in the following, be discussed on the basis of findings from the Danish research project *Home-school co-operation: a cultural given – A multi sited ethnographic study*, financed by the Danish Research Councils and The

Danish School of Education, Aarhus University 2006-2010. (For details see: www.dpu.dk/home-school). We will first present the methodological approach, second the empirical analyses, which illustrate children's school trajectories through homework in three different cases, and third our conclusions.

Our approach to understand homework in Denmark.

The study has been conducted within an educational anthropological framework, identifying different 'sites' for an empirical exploration of the actual tendencies in discourses and practices concerning school-home co-operation. These sites are: (1) International research literature and policy texts, (2) Danish policy texts, and (3) everyday lives in school and home in different areas of Copenhagen in line with the idea of multi-sited ethnography. This approach does not accept the distinction between life worlds of subjects and the world system, or the tradition of solely local, close up perspectives in ethnographic research (Marcus, 1995).

The analyses in this article are based primarily on empirical material from the third site: everyday lives and the perspectives of the subjects. Nevertheless Marcus (1995) argues that "any ethnography of a cultural formation in the world system is also an ethnography of the system, and therefore cannot be understood only in terms of the conventional single-site *mise-en-scène*, assuming indeed it is the cultural formation, produced in several different locales rather than the conditions of a particular set of subjects that is the object of the study" (p.93).

The following is a result of ethnographic fieldworks among a number of children and their families in five different schools in four different areas of Copenhagen. These studies have been conducted in order to contribute to a new understanding of the cultural formation of school – home cooperation in a Danish context, rather than classic ethnographies of the specific locales (Hammersley & Atkison, 1995; Ellen, 1984). One aspect of these fieldwork projects was following homework as a concept, a thing, a practice, an experience, a conflict, a taboo and a performance, in order to understand how the phenomenon appeared and was culturally constructed by the research subjects in the different locales.

In the first case, "Grade zero – a desire for real homework"², fieldwork took place from August 2007 to June 2008 among children, teachers and families belonging to three different zero grade classes in a public primary school in the area of Copenhagen. A specific interest in this study was 'becoming a school-child and a school family'. The researcher (Charlotte Palludan) focused on five children and she participated in the families' everyday lives, at home, in journeys between school and home, in parent meetings and school-home conversations, in events at school with pupils' parents, brothers and sisters etc., and in children's classrooms. Conversations with the five children, their classmates, parents, siblings and teachers were integrated into the fieldwork (Spradley, 1979). The very close relation to the five children and their parents was supplemented, as a consequence of participation in classrooms, school meetings, and events, by observations of, and listening to, the fifty other children and their parents. Arguments and conclusions regarding the zero graders are based on both this close relation to a small group of children and families and a more distant relation to the larger group.

In the next case, "Grade six to seven – multiple homework strategies – when homework becomes a family matter", the fieldwork was conducted at a public primary school in the Copenhagen area from November 2006 to June 2007 and from April to June 2008. During this period the researcher (Karen Ida Dannesboe) followed a school class of sixth to seventh graders (age 12-14) [A 'class' means in Denmark the group of pupils working together in one classroom and over the years in the *Folkeskole*]. Ethnographic observations were undertaken of their school day, of school-home conversations in the school, and social events involving teachers, children and their parents. Interviews with children and parents at home and with teachers were also conducted. Three interviews were conducted with teachers, ten with parents and five group interviews with children. The 23 children were interviewed individually, some twice.

In the third case, "Grade nine – paradoxical voices", two researchers (Niels Kryger and Birte

Ravn) listened to the narratives of 62 nine-graders (age 15-16) in three different lower secondary public schools in the Copenhagen area. These pupils had come to the end of their compulsory education, and their experiences and perceptions of how they had profited from the relations between home and school and of homework were central to the interviews. These pupils were interviewed in nineteen focus groups in socially different areas of Copenhagen and its outskirts in the spring of 2009. The main teachers in each class, five members of the school board at one school, and one head of school were also interviewed. (Kvale, 1994; Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2002)

This broad collection of empirical material embraces the experiences of students of varying ages. As a start, the different age groups have been dealt with separately in the process of analysis. The three separate sets of empirical material were read and re-read, in order to describe patterns, variations and paradoxes in students', parents' and teachers' experiences and practices. Following this, transverse relations between significant and striking elements of the three preliminary analyses have been worked up in order to produce a nuanced qualitative understanding, first of how pupils/students and their families, from the beginning of school-life to the end of compulsory education, ascribe meaning to and cope with homework, and second of how cultural formations of homework are in different ways related to, and have varying consequences for, children's schooling and families' everyday lives during school life .

Grade zero – a desire for 'real' homework.

Homework seems to be a cultural given among the zero graders who we observed. Every child in the three classes involved linked school with homework and found homework a 'natural' step in their transition from kindergarten-child to pupil. Even though differences could be observed in the degree of motivation for doing homework, and in their attention to homework, they all approached homework as a given.

To them homework was:

1. Assignments given by teachers to the children to perform outside school – at home. This understanding of homework is in line with the most common definition of homework: "*homework can be defined as any task*

² At the time of the fieldwork the very first year in school was named zero grade and was voluntary. In 2009 it was introduced as an obligatory first year in school, called *kindergarten class*. This obligatory first year in school signifies, according to the Minister of Education, a connection between pedagogical efforts and school education.

assigned by schoolteachers intended for students to carry out during nonschool hours" (Cooper, Robinson, Patall, 2006, p.1).

2. A task which is distinct from the activities they already knew from kindergarten: to make a drawing, to collect flowers, to make oral narratives, etc. In other words the zero graders found that real homework was reading and writing and doing sums. They relate it - as we understand it - to the acquiring of new competences, or the use of other competences than they used in kindergarten. Thus, the zero graders stressed the educational element of homework.

Many of the observed children in the three classes badly wanted this kind of real homework from the very beginning of their school career. They expressed this by asking for homework, talking about it, and by demonstrating their readiness for it by the way they handled their new bags and their contents - making an effort to make them ready both for school lessons and homework. Their careful handling of the material symbols of 'pupilness', and the ways in which the five focal children of the fieldwork spoke about homework with their families and brothers and sisters, made it obvious that these young children understood homework not only as a cultural given and a natural part of a successful educational strategy but also as a kind of a material and ritual marking of a new and more dominant social status. As an example, one of the girls made an effort to explain to her older brothers that she was doing real homework like them, which illustrates a social strategic element of homework seen from the perspective of the youngest pupils.

Restrictive and protective practices

With the children's attitude towards homework in mind it is interesting that the zero graders were not allowed to have real homework. The teachers avoided it by refusing to assign it most of the time, and when they accepted, which was only occasionally, by insisting on a kind of homework which matched very badly the children's concept of real homework: coloring a copied drawing which related to a teaching theme; choosing and bringing specific things from home in relation to a topic, or speaking to their parents about a selected letter and common kind of tasks. Later on

- in the spring term - some of the teachers relatively carefully attempted to develop creative forms of specific homework tasks, which included 'children writing', as they called it, and thus moved a bit closer to 'real homework'.

Probably it would be adequate to interpret the teachers' practices as an implicit critique of homework, perhaps as a remnant of the critical movement from the seventies mentioned above. Their relatively careful attempt to develop new forms of homework in the spring semester, in addition to their wish to minimize homework, could be interpreted as such. But the critique was never explicitly expressed so it is impossible to determine whether they were critical, and if so, their critique is uncertain. Taking into consideration that the teachers sometimes stressed their position as professionals, you could ask: Was this a professional strategy of avoiding homework because it reduces the professional status of teachers - ignoring their specific competence in teaching while integrating the 'unprofessional' parents as teachers? Or was it a social critique of homework practices because these tend to overlook family differences in economic, social and cultural forms of capital and to exclude informal education practices taking places within the families (De Carvalho, 2001), which are very uncommon in Denmark? The teachers' avoiding approach seems more likely to be an expression of protection of children who they consider too young to be real pupils exposed to such obligations as homework. In that sense their practices were critical.

Rites de passage

As a consequence of the teachers' avoiding attitude to homework they positioned the children in zero grade, especially in the first term, as liminal. According to Van Gennep's concept of 'rites de passage', liminality is a conditional part of a process in which human beings move from one social position to another (Van Gennep, 1977). The paradox is that these teachers kept the children in this liminal stage for so long that they became adapted to a discourse about homework as a burden, leading to an avoiding attitude towards homework which is known from older pupils in school and discussed later in this article. This discourse and attitude among the children were recognized after some months, especially at homes, when parents asked the children about homework, and in our conversations with the children about homework. The zero grade

teachers' avoidance of homework matched the dominant discourse and attitude among students across ages and grades. Imperceptibly, and somehow behind the backs of everyone, a resistance towards homework replaced the children's motivation for and acceptance of homework.

Parent's strategies

The parents represented different strategies. Some tried, like the father in the illustration below, to communicate the children's wish for homework to the teachers.

It was the first parents meeting in zero C. After the teacher had closed down the meeting Karen's father went to the teacher and told him, that Karen very much would like some homework. He asked the teacher if it was possible for him to include homework in his teaching practice. The teacher expressed his knowledge about the children's wishes but he did not give an answer to the father's question (fieldnote).

In this, and similar cases, parents' appeals did not have any impact on the teachers' practices in relation to homework. These parents did not insist on it or discussed it. 'Consensus as a principal' carried a good deal of weight in the school-home relations in this zero grade, which is in line with a long tradition in the *Folkeskole* in Denmark (Ravn, 2008). In one of the five families the mother introduced maths, spelling and reading at home in an informal and spontaneous form.

In this way the parents avoided a discussion or conflict with the school while at the same time satisfying the child's interest in doing homework. These parents found that the mother's practice was a fruitful contribution to the child's learning process and learning conditions, they told the researcher. It was obvious that the mother, who was responsible for this part of the upbringing, also found it pleasant to do sums with her son.

Many of the parents did not question the teachers' postponement strategy, which to some extent follows the tradition of consensus in school-home cooperation (Ravn, 2008).

In addition to this, many of these parents probably agreed that children in zero grade should be protected.

One of the five mothers explicitly argued:

I find it too early for my son to have homework and I try to avoid that the drawing stuff and other kinds of specific 'wanna-be' homework escalate or turn into real homework too soon (fieldwork note).

Her son was one of the few children that did not ask for homework and had difficulties in adapting his body to the school rhythm and activities. Another couple of parents agreed that homework could be introduced too early but their practical way of coping with the children's wish for homework and the teachers' avoiding homework was ambiguous. On the one hand, they found the wish a bit funny and laughed when they recognized the children's wish for homework, maybe because the parents, as pupils and students many years ago, had experienced homework as troublesome and mostly hard work. In that sense their attitude contributed to the imagining of homework as something you must postpone, protect young children from, and, as a pupil, evolve opposition to. On the other hand they laughed at the specific kind of 'homework' the children got and confirmed it was not real, which was perhaps a support to the children's wish for real homework.

All in all, the children were very alone in their explicit demand for real homework. This is essential for our understanding of why they changed their impression of what it meant to be recognized as a proper pupil. Instead of remaining alone in wishing for real homework they joined in with the older pupils and their perspectives on homework. Then, rather than supporting the traditional school's understanding of homework as necessary for the learning and the effectiveness of schooling, they were inspired to develop an oppositional approach to homework. As a consequence children, parents and teachers have to mobilize motivations for homework in the following years. We know from follow-up interviews with the five families, that already in first grade the children had to do homework. It was paradoxical and counter-productive that the children were stripped of their interest in homework and unintentionally settled into a school-life-long struggle with (and maybe against) homework.

Sixth/seventh graders' multiple strategies - when homework becomes a family matter

In another part of Copenhagen the sixth/seventh graders did not wish for homework, but nevertheless homework appeared to be an integral part of these children's everyday lives. Homework was taken for granted. The existence of homework was not questioned by children, or by parents or teachers, but the way homework was handled differed from zero-graders. In this section we will analyse homework as a part of everyday life for the sixth/seventh graders. We will illustrate how children use homework in becoming a school-child, how the responsibility for doing homework is imposed on children as well as their parents, and how children and their families deal with homework in multiple ways.

To become a school-child through homework strategies.

Among the sixth/seventh graders and their families' homework was considered an inescapable part of everyday lives. Homework was described by the children as assignments they had to do on a daily or weekly basis, such as reading a text for Danish, history or biology, doing grammar exercises in English, or maths assignments. They also had bigger assignments such as book reviews or written paper, in Danish. Unlike the zero graders the sixth/seventh graders did not have a great desire for homework, but not surprisingly the teachers had certain strong expectations regarding homework: that the children should be well prepared – meaning that they had done their homework. One of the teachers stressed the importance of homework, and emphasised that the children knew that they had to do their homework and hand in assignments in time and not later than the given deadline.

Well, they have known since 1st grade that they have to organize their school things. We have worked a lot with the 'homework-book' and homework is also written on the blackboard – so there is no excuse for not doing their homework. You have probably heard me say so. So if they have been ill, then I expect that most of them do their homework, too. At least they could call each other. I think it is a poor excuse, when big children say 'But I have been ill' – well then you call

[each other]. That's what you have a phone for. So this is my expectation, but it doesn't always go that way [...]. But I still have the expectation (Teacher).

The sixth/seventh graders were aware of the responsibility and many of the children did try to remember to do their homework, but to a large extent homework was experienced as a duty they had to fit in with other activities outside school and with the organisation of family life. For many of the children homework was therefore done at the last minute, and sometimes they even made small assignments in school, during breaks or lessons. As one of the girls, Lea explained:

Well, I try to do it [homework] during lessons then, I try to do it quickly. Normally I just tell the teacher that I haven't done it. And then I do it during the Lesson... Or I think about my homework. For example in Danish we have to work with a text in our reading book, then you can just think about it instead of doing it, so I just think and then I explain my thoughts.

For Lea, as well as for many of the other children in this study, their engagement in homework seemed to be intrinsically connected with a strategy for performing in school. In Lea's case she managed to explain her thoughts and thereby position herself as an active school-child. Like Lea, many of the sixth/seventh graders only did the homework that was necessary to perform well (or fairly good) in school and they used their work with homework to be recognised as a specific kind of school child (not only as a 'high achiever', but also as an 'average pupil' or a 'troublemaker') in relation to teachers, classmates and parents.

Homework as a family responsibility

The teachers did not always experience children's behaviour as 'responsible' when it concerned homework. Children needed to be made aware of that responsibility not only through notes on the blackboard, but also by notifying their parents. Through a newsletter to all parents in the class and during school-home conversations the parents were made aware of their responsibility as school parents, as teachers addressed the issue of homework. Parents should be involved in children's school life including

homework. As Lucas Forsberg states, "homework could also be understood as an assignment to parents" (Forsberg 2007, p.210). It is important to add that homework becomes a family matter when the issue of homework is not only an issue between teachers and students, or teachers and parents, but is also made an issue for both children and their families. In this context homework appears to be part of an implicit multi-pronged strategy for strengthening the relations between school and families by involving parents in school life by making them responsible for children doing their homework³, and by making school life part of family life by expecting homework to be a mutual affair between children and parents. As stated by McCarthy and Kirkpatrick (2005) the implications of homework for family life is to a large extent unnoticed in a British context. This poses the question of how homework influences family life in specifically a Danish context. How is homework made an issue between the sixth/seventh graders and their families?

Families coping differently with homework

When we look at how the children and families we studied handled homework, issues about homework and homework itself were organised differently in time and space and were performed differently by children and their parents. According to Alldred, David, and Edwards (2002) boundaries are negotiated between school and home. This is particularly clear when looking at homework. Some of the sixth/seventh graders' families can be characterised as families in which homework seemed to be an integrated part of home life and where the families' way of coping with homework made a clear link between school issues and home life. Other families can be characterised as families in which the boundary between school and home seemed more profound, as school life only played a small role at home and homework seemed absent or at least was not an explicit issue between children and parents.

For two of the sixth/seventh graders, Kasper and Dennis, homework was a recurrent issue within the family. Both Kasper and Dennis said that they had to do their homework and in both cases their parents asked them every day. Kasper explained that he usually did his homework at the dinner table just next to the kitchen. In that way

he was close to his parents and he preferred that instead of being in his room. He did his homework on his own, but his parents' presence made it easy to ask for help. For Kasper homework seemed to be a necessary and central part of his family life, but it also appeared to be an uncomplicated matter. This was not the case for Dennis. In his home homework seemed to be an ever present burden. He said that he did not like to do his homework, but his mother, who raised him as a single mother, insisted. Homework was in general not an easy job for Dennis and often he and his mother sat together to practise his homework. Homework appeared to be hard work for both mother and son. In the cases of Kasper and Dennis their parents ensured that doing homework was included in the organisation of family life and both Kasper and Dennis were daily reminded of their responsibility for doing homework. Even though both families made homework a central issue at home their efforts were not recognised equally by the teachers. Kasper managed to perform well. Even though he sometimes got into trouble, he had done his homework and participated in the lessons. Dennis, however, was often positioned as a troublemaker with low achievements, who did not participate much in school work, and the effort he and his mother did put into homework was to a large extent unrecognised by the teachers.

In other families homework was not a central issue between children and their parents. On the surface homework was more or less absent. But when we look closer at those families we see some very different stories of homework and school life. Usually Johan did his homework in his own room in the house where he lived with his mother and little sister. His mother did not ask him about it and he preferred not to talk about homework. His mother did not interfere. If he had difficulties he would ask for help and as long as she had the impression that he did all right, homework was his own business. In other words as long as he acted as a responsible school child (as defined by teachers and imposed on parents) he controlled where and when he did his homework. To a certain extent he thereby controlled the boundaries between school and home. In other cases homework was also more or less absent, or at least an issue not discussed very much. For Line, a girl in the same class, homework had become an issue she tried to neglect because it was too painful. She explained that she had difficulties in many subjects, and

³ See also (Knudsen 2008) for an elaborated analysis of parental responsibility in the relation between school and home.

maths in particular, and that her parents could no longer help her. So she stopped asking for help and tried to deal with it on her own with the result that she did not do maths, as she could not get help at home and did not understand the maths teacher. Earlier her mother had offered to ask for extra help in school, but Line had refused. She said it was a matter of pulling herself together and she preferred to deal with it on her own. In both cases the parents respected their children's wish for coping with homework on their own, but the children were also aware of their parents' willingness and qualifications to help or to get help for homework. As a result homework was more or less excluded as a family matter

These four families' homework practices revealed that homework is entangled in home life in diverse ways – from being an explicit and well integrated part of the organisation of family life to being a less visible, almost excluded, part of family life. The families' different engagements in homework further revealed how boundaries between school and home are not clear cut or given, but are produced differently in everyday lives.

Grade nine – paradoxical voices

From the narratives of sixty-two ninth graders about work in school, homework, plans for the future, parents' concern and support, and teacher-parent communication, we saw a complex pattern of different layers. In this pattern we found an important distinction between, on the one hand, what can be mentioned as the 'school-adaptive voice', in which the young people presented themselves as 'serious' school-children trying to live up to the expectations, not only of the school but also of society as a whole, that they should be successful human beings, and, on the other, voices which are based on concrete experiences of ruptures, meaningless homework, problems in finding time for leisure activities, improper adult control, injustice, strategic acting, bluffing etc.

Even though these voices differed in their concrete narratives (with respect to adult control, bluffing, etc.), nearly all the sixty-two pupils had a 'school-adaptive' voice and elements in the voices appeared to be surprisingly similar from pupil to pupil. In the following we identify elements in the school-adaptive voice and some main patterns in the other voices.

The school adaptive voice: 'Serious' narratives on homework and school – success

Most of the ninth graders who were interviewed found that homework was a natural order of schooling, a cultural given. They found it difficult to imagine a school life without homework. We asked them all if they could imagine a school without homework and a typical answer was like these, formulated by two boys:

Kristian: (somewhat astonished) *A school without homework?*

Jakob: *I doubt it is possible to have a school without homework.... Theoretically you could, but then you would need longer lessons and to work here in school [...] and I am not sure I would like it.*

These boys had adopted the general idea that homework not only is a cultural given, but also a necessity from an efficiency point of view. When Jakob said that if ever he should imagine a school without homework it would need more time in school ("longer lessons" and "work here in school"), it was the same as saying that more effective schooling would need more time than there currently is in school.

Even pupils on a collision course with the school and defined as troublemakers – by themselves as well as by the school - mobilised this school adaptive voice when it concerned homework. Ahmed, who had an immigrant background, was one of them. In our interview he appeared to be a good story teller with stories full of irony and imaginative formulations. After he was blamed, at the last home school meeting, for 'disrupting the lessons' and not 'pulling himself together', he told us that now he intended to "become a good boy (Danish: 'Dengse')" and he added:

I think we should have more assignments ('pensum'), Got it! [...] so you can be prepared for the exams. It's no use to end school with an 02 like the other 'perkere'.

Here Ahmed, on the one hand, claimed his membership of this group of immigrants ('perkere') and, on the other, claimed the need for

performing better than the other 'perkere'⁴ (02 is the lowest mark without failing).

Whether Ahmed really wanted to live up to the school's expectations is an open question. Perhaps he knew that it would be nearly unattainable for him. However, Ahmed's case illustrates that even those who are furthest out on a collision course with the school make use of the school adaptive voice; the need for homework is part of this voice.

Independence and adult support/control

These ninth graders were on a crucial step towards adulthood and independence. They were quite conscious about this while acknowledging at the same time that there was a need for support and back-up from the grownups.

When it comes to the question of adult support and adult control many of them took a positive position towards taking responsibility and being mature. It had become part of the school adaptive voice. They stressed that earlier in their school life they needed their parents – and teachers – to check (control) them in order to make them doing their homework. But now – they said – it is first and foremost their own business and their own responsibility.

If they involved their parents it was to make them help on their own (the pupils') terms e.g. with substantial matters (in math, in French etc):

Zenta: When I was younger they (my parents) read with us and trained with us but little by little you become almost independent. So now they know what you do and they trust you...

Some of them (still) wanted their parents to control and check if they have made their homework.

Benefit from homework: for school – for life?

We have several examples of ninth graders claiming that they benefit from homework. However, rarely these stories were about substantial issues; it was rather a question of being recognized for their performance.

Anna: [...] I think it would be rather dull if you only made homework in school. Then you don't have the

⁴ The term 'perker'⁴ is a derogatory term for immigrants in Denmark. But groups of immigrants sometimes call each other for perker(e) (with the "e" = plural).

opportunity to go home and do what may satisfy you and then come and show it.

And others talked about the satisfaction of doing homework:

Laila: I didn't use to do my lessons and got 02 and 04 [low marks] - now I do them and I get 10 and 12 [high marks] [...]

Lena: You understand better when you get prepared.

So, when these ninth graders argued for the necessity of homework they generally referred to how (they believed) it would help them succeed in school. However, when it concerned life outside school they had difficulties formulating the benefit of homework. The exchange value of what they learned was in focus, but they had apparently very few ideas of how they could use school work in general and homework in particular.

Blurred forms of homework

Besides the positive stories about the necessity of homework, they had a lot of stories about bluffing, strategic acting, absurdity in concrete activities and stories about how homework made inroads into their scanty leisure time.

In many cases they felt that the assignments and control from the teachers overlapped or blurred. This partly confused the pupils and partly encouraged for strategic acting, like Kristian who explained how their teacher in history instructed them to take notes for homework when they read the text from the history textbook. They could not see the purpose of taking notes, but when asked why they then did take notes, Kristian answered:

Yes ... it is to be sure so the teacher can see that you have understood. So, when you have been reading it all and taken notes, then you can remember what has happened in the chapters and where.

Even if it was an activity which seemed difficult to accept, Kristian (tried to) take the teacher's perspective in his wording: "...so the teacher knows that you have understood".

In this blurred situation it was often difficult for the pupils to see what happened to their exercises. "The teachers don't care about the

exercise", a boy said, and several others across the schools and classes said that they felt that the teachers only wanted the exercise returned to make sure pupils had done the homework. Only a few pupils told us what they learned from homework.

Strategic action may end up in bluffing, of which these pupils gave examples:

Int.: I have heard somebody say that if you don't bluff a little then you won't get through. True?

Peter: Yeah, you are right. If there is one test in maths you can solve, then you do it and then he believes that you have done it all.

Jacob: Or you aim for the teacher not discovering it - and then you sit hiding behind the book.

Brian: Or in maths ... all answers are in the back of the book - and if you don't do them you pull up the list or booklet, then you can read it aloud.

To sum up about the ninth graders, we found a surprisingly strong discrepancy between, on the one hand, the many stories about the necessity of homework and, on the other, the lack of stories about the concrete benefits of homework in relation to their future life and in relation to their current life outside school.

Moreover, we found surprisingly little connection between what we have called the 'adaptive school voice' and the other voices. Even though the pupils argued for the importance of homework with the adaptive voice, at the same time and with fascination and delight, they told how they developed strategies for bluffing and cheating when they had not done their homework.

Conclusions.

In general we found that the existence of homework as a concept and as a practice never seemed to be questioned, it was taken for granted. Even though some pupils, as well as some parents and teachers, tried to avoid homework, nobody was inclined to approach homework with a critical attitude or could imagine a school without homework. So the actors' narratives and practices expressed the same kind of taken - for - grantedness as homework in general has achieved in a Danish context (in policy texts, debates etc.), as an integral part of

attending school. In other words the actors seem to draw on - and interact with - discourses and practices in other sites in society.

We have especially focused on how the children and families that we studied are active co-producers of the cultural formation of homework.

Our findings can be summarized thus:

- a. homework has a role in constructing the child's identity as 'school-pupil' and generally as a child or young person;
- b. homework has a role in making connections and boundaries between home and school; and
- c. homework has a the role as an element in socialisation to schooling and labour, with a focus on exchange value rather than use value.

a) The role of homework in constructing the child's identity as school-pupil and generally as child or young person - a question of being recognised as mature.

Homework had a symbolic function in the pupils' construction of an identity not only as pupils but also as children or young people. So even though they often did not necessarily enjoy homework as a concrete activity, they needed the homework (or the imagination of homework) as a symbol of constructing themselves as pupils. In the start of school life we saw how the small zero-graders (6-7 years old) struggled to be recognised as pupils by asking for homework. Before the first grade, however, the teachers were reticent about assigning homework. So, in this case, homework had a symbolic function, both for teachers and parents, in the transition from pre-school-child to pupil. In the children's own perspectives, being valued as old enough to be assigned homework was a symbol of being recognised as mature. At the end of the school-career we saw a new step in this symbolic linking of maturity and homework, since the ninth graders said that they had come to a stage in their life where they could take responsibility for their own activities and obligations regarding homework. They had become mature young people. Therefore some of these pupils felt that parents' intervention at home was unfair. Our material also showed signs of an ambiguous attitude towards the pupils on the part of parents and teachers. It seemed to the pupils that the adults never had full confidence in pupils' abilities to take care of their homework. The teachers kept on involving the parents and the parents kept on controlling their children. As a

consequence, the children and young people were kept in a liminal position, not just in the zero grade but all the way through primary and lower secondary school, waiting for a social position as independent individuals.

b) The role of homework in making connections and boundaries between home and school.

Intervention in private life is often seen as a colonisation of family life. Looking at homework in this way, however, requires one to have in mind that many parents and children are themselves active in this 'colonisation'. In many ways, how to deal with the children's homework or absence of homework, was made a family issue, as was the case of the zero graders in this study. On the one hand, teachers tried to involve parents in children's school life by making them aware of and responsible for the children carrying out their homework. On the other hand, however, children had different strategies for involving their parents or not.

For the zero graders and their families, homework was made an issue between children and parents as the children made their parents aware of their wish for real homework. The parents complied differently with their children's wishes. One family introduced a kind of homework at home, while others neglected the wish for homework. Even though one family confronted the teacher with the children's wish for homework, no parents made a big issue out of it and it never turned into a conflict between school and home. In general these families accepted the teachers' choices on homework.

For the sixth/seventh graders and their families homework was made a family matter as the responsibility for doing homework was imposed on both children and their parents by the teachers. Homework appeared to be a way to get parents involved in school life, as well as a way to make school a part of family life. In some families time for homework was included in the organisation of every day lives and was an issue for both children and their parents. In other families homework was primarily the children's concern. The different homework-strategies revealed that homework as a family matter was not only a question of family time and parental interest in homework. The families' strategies concerning homework also revealed that these

families had very different resources in everyday lives for making boundaries and links with the school.

For the oldest pupils homework was still a family matter but in a complex way, as many of these young people's homes were seen as arenas within which to demonstrate their independence and autonomy by claiming to take responsibility for their own homework. At the same time, many said that their parents intervened if they didn't 'live up' to their responsibility.

c) Homework as an unavoidable burden and an element in a socialisation to schooling and labour that focuses on exchange value rather than use value.

Another side of the coin, and inextricably intertwined with seeing homework as a symbol of being recognised as mature, is to consider homework as a burden. Perhaps teachers in zero grade – as in our material – are co-actors in establishing this attitude by communicating that their avoidance of homework is 'protecting' the children from the hard work of doing homework. For the sixth/seventh graders homework appeared to be a burden, because it was something they were supposed to do and they seemed to try to balance their homework-activities with other activities outside school and teachers' and parents' expectations of school work. However the perception of homework as a burden among these pupils generally did not lead to alternative views on schooling and everyday lives in school, or to dreams of a school without homework. The burden was seen as something unavoidable because schooling and homework were understood as a necessity and a given duty by the involved pupils. From an utopian perspective one might expect that the children would make claims for homework's use value, but we should credit the children for successfully playing the game in coping with the homework practises of the school. Not only the children, but also their parents and teachers, contribute to a consensus-creating attitude to homework. This could be why the growing number of official documents about discipline and sanctions for pupils not doing their homework, mentioned in the start of this article, seemed to have no influence in the localities studied.

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