

Parental perspectives on Danish full-day schools for ethnic-minority students.

Lars Holm

Aarhus University
Copenhagen, Denmark

With regard to ethnic-minority students, different education-policy strategies have been discussed and tested in Denmark over the past 30 to 40 years. The most recent are the so-called “full-day schools”, which have been established in a number of municipalities that have areas with a high concentration of ethnic-minority students. Based on an understanding of full-day schools as an education-policy strategy, I use a policy-ethnographic perspective to analyse a trial that took place in the three local schools in the area of Vollsmose in Odense, Denmark. One class from each school was selected for the three-year research project. Using qualitative data from the research project I describe and analyse parents’ reactions to and interpretations of the full-day school trial. These insights illuminate not only the different attitudes of an often overlooked group of actors in response to a trial at their local schools, but also the contradicting values and norms that apply to schooling ethnic-minority students on a more general level. The findings suggest a need for a highly differentiated and “non-ethnicised” view of ethnic minority parents..

Keywords: full-day schools, ethnic-minority parents, school-home relations, super-diversity.

Full-day schools as an education-policy strategy

Using a concept from discourse analysis (Laclau & Mouffe, 2002) the term “full-day schools” might be characterised as an “empty” or “floating signifier” that functions as a symbolic common denominator for a wide variety of projects. The term is used to describe both special schools for children with behavioural problems or psychological conditions, and a specific type of trial that started after 2006 at several primary and upper-secondary schools all over Denmark. At the time of this writing, there are 11 municipal trials of full-day schools in Denmark: in Copenhagen, Hvidovre, Høje Tåstrup, Odense, Aarhus and Esbjerg. All of these full-day schools share the fact that they are testing an eight-lesson school day, and that the trials are all being conducted in so-called “disadvantaged housing areas” or “ghetto areas”. Typically, these housing areas are where at least 40% of the residents receive benefits, and at least 40% are immigrants and descendants of

immigrants from non-Western countries (Socialministeriet, 2006). But the full-day schools differentiate themselves from each other in other ways. They are each part of different municipal strategies regarding ethnic-minority students, and they either encompass the entire schooling process, or just children from 10 to 14 years of age or children from 6 to 9 years of age (Holm & Valentin 2007).

Seen from a broad education-policy perspective, full-day schools are interesting because they seem to be a new and different school strategy for ethnic-minority students in comparison to a “distribution strategy” or a “magnet-school strategy”, for example. A so-called distribution strategy is based on the idea that one can ensure better academic results for ethnic-minority students by changing the distribution percentage of these students, so that there are, for example, no more than 15%–20% minority students in any class. Such a distribution strategy has been implemented in the municipality of Aarhus, and it involves some of the ethnic-minority parents being denied the opportunity to

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Lars Holm, e-mail: larsh@edu.au.dk

place their children in the local district school. In contrast, the municipality of Copenhagen has worked with a voluntary "magnet-school strategy" for a number of years. This involved developing a particularly attractive school profile and competence structure with the aim of changing the student base by attracting specific groups of students from other school districts (Holm and Valentin 2007). Seen in relation to these two school strategies, full-day schools for ethnic-minority students appear to be a third, new education-policy strategy because the aim is *not* to change the student profile of a school. Based on this, full-day schools may be considered an interesting alternative to a distribution strategy. However, a more pragmatic interpretation is that the concentration of ethnic-minority students is so high in the areas where full-day school trials have been established that a distribution strategy would have serious consequences for the schools' continued existence.

Each of the Danish full-day schools was established by means of an application for dispensation from the Danish Law on primary and lower-secondary schools (*Folkeskoleloven* in Danish) §16 part 3, which states that the longest teaching period for early-schooling students must not exceed six lessons in a school day. A recurring theme in the schools' applications to the Ministry for Children and Education is that an extended school day is justified due to special conditions that apply to the students starting school in the school district. In the applications from the three schools in Vollsmose, the justification for the trial with full-day schools was that students in the housing area are not "linguistically, socially and behaviourally at the age-appropriate level", and that there is a need for better school results and increased integration (Holm and Valentin 2007: 18). Thus, arguments for full-day schools are related to general deficiencies and a lack of academic success among a particular group of students in a specific housing area. In contrast to the "old" full-day schools – where the composition of the student body was based on diagnosed behavioural problems in individual students – the new full-day schools clearly represent a far cruder categorisation. Here, it is not the characteristics of an individual student that determine whether or not he/she is 'enrolled' in a full-day school, but instead whether he/she lives in a particular housing area.

Researching the full-day schools in Vollsmose

The full-day schools in Odense are located in Vollsmose – an area of north-eastern Odense that has approximately 10,000 residents. It is one of the places in Denmark that has received a lot of negative attention and, in a number of contexts, it is considered to be a "disadvantaged" or "vulnerable" housing area. The three district schools in the local area have around 1,200 students in total, of which 90% are ethnic minorities. The full-day school trial project started in 2006, lasted for three years and involved early-schooling students at all three schools in Vollsmose; more than 500 students and 80–90 teachers and preschool teachers were included¹. This article is based on the results of a three-year research project, which was aimed at illuminating how a trial of local schools is constructed, functions and is understood by key groups of actors, and how these groups of actors behave in response to the trial (Holm 2008; Holm 2009; Holm and Valentin 2007)². Theoretically speaking, the research project was inspired by policy-ethnography (Levinson and Sutton 2001; Shore and Wright 1997). This means that a "school" is understood as a complex societal enterprise that is created and given its form and contents by different groups of actors' behaviours and attitudes towards school, learning, socialisation and society. The theoretical orientation of this research project included an interest in studying the interactions between schools and parents. The use of this theoretical perspective means shifting the focus away from an understanding of education policy as a linear, top-down process that is based on an implicit idea that the implementation of concrete policy initiatives is a more or less passive transfer to a given target group. This is replaced with an understanding of policy as something that is simultaneously negotiated in different social arenas, and something that is actively acquired by the various actors who, for example, support or reject a project like the full-day school trial.

¹ The municipality of Odense has decided to continue the trial among early-schooling students, extending it to include students in Grade 4 (children around 10 years of age).

² The research project was conducted in collaboration between the municipality of Odense and Aarhus University, Department of Education.

Previous studies have shown that establishing full-day schools in Vollsmose created a certain dynamic in the schools and the surrounding local community. In the schools, the increased teaching time has led to discussions about: how the school day can be organised; how the increased teaching time can be filled with content; and how the increased cooperation between pre-school teachers and teachers (which is a result of establishing full-day schools) can be conceived and designed (Holm 2008; Holm 2009; Holm and Valentin, 2007). In the following, I focus on a group of actors that is often overlooked in the research and discussions about education-policy issues related to ethnic minorities; namely, the parents. My central question is about how parent groups in Vollsmose react to the "new" school strategy for which full-day schools are an example. Therefore, my attention is directed towards the actions of the parents and their interpretation of the full-day school trials. Insights here both shed light on a local school trial and elucidate more general positions, norms and values among ethnic-minority parents in relation to their children's schooling.

The empirical basis for my analysis of parental perspectives is informal conversations I held with parents of students in the three focus classes that were part of the research project, observations during meetings at the schools and parent-teacher meetings, and semi-structured research interviews conducted in the parents' homes. However, it became apparent that the language conditions in Vollsmose made it difficult to create a situation in which a somewhat equally matched and open dialogue was possible. Using an interpreter would put a strain on the conversation, while not using an interpreter could potentially exclude large groups of parents and would lead to obvious problems in terms of a representative sample. Linguistic issues aside, it was not an easy task to establish an open dialogue between the parents of children at full-day schools and a school researcher from outside the area – who could be viewed as someone sent by "the municipality" or "the state". In this situation, there would be a significant risk of "impression management" (Goffman 1959). I attempted to overcome these substantial methodological issues – which are related both to being an "outsider" and to not speaking the parents' preferred language – by involving an "insider" to conduct the semi-structured research interviews with Arabic-speaking parents of children in the three focus

classes. My research assistant was multilingual, speaking both Danish and Arabic, lived in Vollsmose and had been a student at one of the schools. Some of the research interviews with students in the three focus classes also provided key insights into the dynamics that the full-day school trial generated among the parent group.

Parental perspectives on the full-day school trial

The three years of fieldwork I conducted in Vollsmose clearly documents that the ethnic-minority parents are very engaged in their children's schooling and education. Based on the parent-teacher meetings, among other things, it appears that the parents place great importance on their children doing well at school. Success at school and, not least of all, mastery of the Danish language is thought to pave the way to higher education, social progression and success in later life. In addition, a large proportion of the parents also prioritises and appreciates developments in their child's multilingualism. Around 80% of the children in the three classes in question received private tuition from schools that the students call "Arabic", "Somali" or "Koran" schools (Holm 2008; Holm 2009; Holm & Valentin 2007). Ethnic-minority parents' awareness of and engagement with their children's education is an internationally well-documented phenomenon (Bouakaz 2007). In light of this, education should be viewed as a potentially constructive meeting place for a dialogue between ethnic-minority parents and central education-policy actors at the local level, in the form of the municipal school administration and school management.

The following analysis of parental perspectives draws upon research done by Freebody and Ludwig (1995) on Australian school policy. They use an approach with which they analyse the discursive positions and theoretical understandings that are primary in various actors' perspectives on the school's function. For example, if some actors consider the school's main task to be to equip students with particular academic competences, then their discursive positions are related to the education system's *skill-developing* function. However, according to Freebody and Ludwig (ibid.), if the school's primary function is thought to be socialisation via the regulation of children's time at school and at

home, then the actors' discursive positions are related to the *regulatory* function.

The temporal logic of full-day schools

If one looks more closely at the justification for the full-day school trial as expressed in the schools' applications, a key element is that the students are defined as being "delayed" – as in "not at an age-appropriate level" compared to the average Danish student at the same age. In one of the applications, this legitimisation figure was worded as such: "to give our students the opportunity to achieve the same academic level as students at the other schools in the municipality of Odense" (Holm and Valentin 2007). In this school's explanation for why full-day schools are relevant and necessary, the education system's *skill-development* function is in the foreground. Overall, the intended outcome of establishing full-day schools in Vollsmose is for students to learn more and reach the same attainment targets as ethnic Danish students. The foremost means to achieving this goal is to expand teaching hours in early schooling to 40 lessons per week. The extra lessons are mainly used in the three schools in Vollsmose to increase the number of Danish-language and mathematics lessons (Holm and Valentin 2007). Thus, the full-day schools are embedded in a quantitative temporal logic that is based on the assumption that more time at school leads directly to more learning³. Furthermore, a characteristic trait of the full-day school trials in Vollsmose is that they depart from the Danish school system's basic premise that the time a child spends at school gradually increases according to their grade, and (implicitly) according to the child's biological age and cognitive development⁴. The full-day schools in Vollsmose represent a departure from this way of thinking, as only the early-schooling students have a longer school day. This means that, when these students transition from Grade 3 to Grade 4⁵, they will spend fewer

hours at school. Therefore, the relationship between biological age and time spent at school is particularly evident in the Vollsmose full-day schools because the extended school day has only been introduced in early schooling.

Although they are generally very engaged in their children's schooling, parents strongly criticised the full-day school trials, especially during the first six months. The full-day school project was criticised at parents' meetings and in the press, based on a range of perspectives that were mostly related to the school's regulatory function. At numerous, well-attended parents' meetings, the new full-day schools were the subject of often heated discussions, in which the legitimacy of the full-day schools was brought into question. Several of the parents remarked that "the children are very tired when they come home from school", and others pointed out that older students would benefit more from an extended school day than those in early schooling. Furthermore, in my interviews with parents, it became evident that some felt that the full-day school would have a negative influence on their child's childhood because a longer school day reduces the amount of time children can be with their friends, participate in sports activities and develop their own interests. Either the parents were sceptical about the idea that an extended school day leads to more learning, or they did not focus on this in their interpretation of the full-day school trial.

The general school system in Denmark is based on the idea the amount of time children spend at school gradually increases with each grade level, and implicitly with their biological age and cognitive development (Anderson-Levitt 1996). The full-day schools in Vollsmose depart from this idea as only early-schooling children have an extended school day, and the number of lessons is decreased when they enter lower-secondary school. This seems to be an important factor in why the group of parents has a more sociologically orientated view of time: they perceive time as a resource that can be negotiated between different social actors, and having control over time is seen as a manifestation of social control (Holm & Valentin 2007). From this perspective, the introduction of full-day schools appears to regulate time and fill it with content – not just for the students, but also for the families.

When a mother of one of the students at an full-day school expressed her perception of the full-day school trial by saying in a loud voice at a

³ It should be mentioned that several studies seem to indicate that there is no general scientific basis for this assumption (Holm & Valentin 2006).

⁴ The Danish Law on primary and lower-secondary school from 2010 describes an increasing minimum number of lessons from grade 1-3, grade 4-6 and grade 7-9.

⁵ In 2010, the municipality of Odense decided that the full-day school trial in Vollsmose would be expanded to include Grade 4 so that the reduction in time spent at school would instead occur when students advance into Grade 5.

parents' meeting, "You are taking our children away from us", and when another parent said in an interview that the children at full-day schools "spend too little time with their parents, and get their manners and traditions from school rather than from their parents" – it is evident that the school's regulatory function is in the foreground of the parents' interpretation of the full-day school trial.

The extended socialisation at full-day schools

The departure from the temporal logic of the general Danish school system is the basis for full-day schools being seen as an expression of an intensified institutional regulation of ethnic-minority families' lives rather than as a qualitative improvement of school services. Thus, some parents view the full-day school as a kind of "replacement family" (Kolbe et al. 2009), wherein the school assumes a greater role in socialisation, thereby reducing the family's role. Some parents experience this as offensive and as an indication that they are not considered to be equal to other citizens in Danish society with regard to having the social, cultural and linguistic capital that is required to socialise their children.

One specific reason why some parents view full-day schools as an intensified form of socialisation is related to the fact that the full-day schools in Vollsmose are constructed to be homework-free schools. This means that – due to the longer school day – students do not have to do homework at home, and are therefore not expected to carry their books to and from school (Palludan 2008). Thus, the full-day schools shift the responsibility for homework to the school, which means that some parents feel that an important function has been taken away from them, that they do not have an adequate understanding of their child's schooling, and that they are not given enough opportunity to support their child's academic development. One of the mothers formulated her point of view as such: "Children should have homework to do at home so that parents can assist in helping and developing their child. At the moment, we cannot be part of it because the children do not bring their books or homework home." Homework clearly has an important symbolic role in many parents' perception of their parental roles and in their view of the school enterprise. In my fieldwork, it became apparent that there is a practice in many families – or there is the desire to have a practice – whereby parents and siblings do homework

together. Thus, for many parents, "freeing" students from homework is a problematic aspect of full-day schools because homework is considered to be central to children's learning as well as for the school-home relationship and for a responsible fulfilment of the parental role. The fact that homework plays an important role in how the school is interpreted – and that it can be a significant marker of difference between traditional Danish schools and independent ethnic schools – is illustrated by a student who explained that her father told her that she would be transferred to an independent Arabic school "where there is homework".

Full-days schools' categorisation and school strategy

The group of parents was not only concerned with the function of the full-day school; some parents were also concerned with the crude categorisation on which the full-day school trial is based – i.e., that the children in Vollsmose are "not at the age-appropriate level". One mother problematised this categorisation by pointing out that full-day schools may be a good initiative for some children, but not for everyone. Another parent considered the full-day schools to be a discriminatory measure because the extended school day has only been introduced in Vollsmose and does not apply to all students in the municipality of Odense. In relation to this problematisation of the residence-based categorisation, one father remarked that establishing full-day schools "gives a bad impression of people who live in Vollsmose".

The parents' interpretation of the full-day school trial as an extension of the school's regulatory function has, in many cases, caused parents to consider transferring their children to different schools. A mother of a Grade 2 student explained that she had been thinking about transferring the family's five children to different schools as a result of the full-day school trial. However, the children were against the idea of changing schools because their friends attend the full-day school, and they themselves were happy there. In this case, the plans to change schools were dropped, but in other cases, disagreements about school strategies created a great deal of conflict within families. This was evident in the interviews I conducted with students in the focus classes; in several cases, the parents' desire to transfer their children to a different school had

caused severe and long-lasting conflicts between children and their parents.

The parents' deliberations about changing schools took two different forms: some parents tried to find a school for their children in which there are a limited number of ethnic-minority students. They did not think that the schools in Vollsmose, with their special composition of students, were able to ensure that their children learn "proper Danish" and, as a result, they looked for schools with a high proportion of "Danish students". Other parents gravitated towards independent ethnic schools. Several parents remarked that their deliberations about changing schools had been a frustrating experience, because they were forced to acknowledge that a transfer was not possible – either because there were not enough places available at the school in question, or because transportation issues meant that changing schools was more or less impossible. One parent commented on this situation: "In a way, we're forced to keep our children at the schools where they are now."

Thus, the regulatory function of school appears to be the main interpretative position among the group of parents. To a great extent, their interpretation is related to the departure of full-day schools from a temporal logic that is based on developmental psychology. The extended school day is also viewed as an extended socialisation on the part of the school, which disempowers the parents to a certain extent and interferes with their ability to plan activities for the children's free time. This interpretative position leads to a discourse with a strong opposition between the ethnic-minority parents on one side and the local district schools and the municipality on the other. Although the parents, the schools and the municipality all attach great importance to the academic success of ethnic-minority students, there does not seem to be a broad consensus among the parents with regard to the full-day school trial in Vollsmose as a school strategy.

Concluding remarks and perspectives

From a general education-policy perspective, the "new" full-day schools – with their "non-distribution strategy" – seem to be an alternative to distribution strategy's basic premise: that ethnic-minority students achieve better results at school if the majority of students in a class are "ethnic Danes". Furthermore, a characteristic trait of full-day schools is that they are fundamentally

based on a categorisation of inhabitants in a particular residential area rather than on a professional assessment of individual children's academic needs.

The categorisation, legitimisation and temporal logic of the full-day schools in Odense have led to a dynamic among the group of parents that reveals oppositional norms and values regarding time, learning and responsibility. The parents respond critically to the quantitative increase in the amount of time children spend at school as well as to their children being categorised as "not at an age-appropriate level". The parents also interpret the full-day school trial as a form of intensified regulation and feel that it invalidates the family's cultural and linguistic capital. Thus, the introduction of full-day schools in Vollsmose appears to be a process that is wrought with conflict, in which opposition between groups of parents and the school as an institution becomes actualised and intensified. Furthermore, the introduction of full-day schools in Vollsmose has provoked and escalated discussions about which school strategies and into which values and norms parents want to invest their children.

In a broader education-policy perspective, this analysis presents parental perspectives with regard to the full-day schools in Vollsmose and indicates that it may not be possible to develop one single school strategy that all ethnic-minority parents can be expected to support. The parent group's opinions of and values about school, learning and childhood are too divergent for that to happen. This highlights the importance of developing school strategies in dialogue with – and not just for – ethnic-minority parents and their children. From a research perspective, it also seems significant to emphasise a different trait that is characteristic of parental perspectives about the full-day school trial in Vollsmose: although dominant traits can be identified in the parental discourse, this should not be seen as a justification for associating particular ethnic groups with specific attitudes and values. In my fieldwork, it was clear that there is great degree of variation in opinions among families from the same ethnic background as well as differences in opinion within the same family. In light of this, it is not appropriate to try to base analytical conclusions on, or to generalise about, specific *ethnic groups'* attitudes towards school – as has been done in previous studies (Hedegaard 1999). Rather, it is more productive to consider ethnic-minority parents in Vollsmose in the same way as

other parents – as parents with divergent opinions regarding school, learning and education, who are also very concerned that their children have the best possible schooling – in accordance with the parents' value-based orientation. The findings of this study suggest that urban areas with "ethnic" minorities can no longer be described and analysed as communities defined by ethnicity or

language. The term "super-diversity" has been used to refer to the emergence of unstable and diversified communities in modern urban areas with a high concentration of ethnic-minorities (Vertovec, 2007, Blommaert, 2010). This concept might be useful for understanding the complex dynamics in school-home relations.

References

- Anderson-Levitt, K. M. (1996). "Behind Schedule: Batch-Produced Children in French and U.S. Classrooms", in B. A. Levinson, D. Foley and D. C. Holland (eds.), *The Cultural Production of the Educated Person. Critical Ethnographies of Schooling and Local Practice*. Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press.
- Blommaert, J. (2010) *The sociolinguistics of Globalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bouakaz, L. (2007): *Parental involvement in school. What hinders and what promotes parental involvement in an urban school?* Malmö, Sweden: Lärarutbildningen i Malmö.
- Freebody, P. and Ludwig, C. (1995). *Everyday literacy practices in and out of schools in low socio-economic urban communities*. Brisbane, Australia: Centre for Literacy Education Research.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday.
- Hedegaard, M. (1999). "Institutional Practices, Cultural Positions and Personal Motives: Immigrant Turkish Parents' Conceptions about their Children's School Life", in S. Chaiklin, M. Hedegaard and U. J. Jensen (eds.), *Activity Theory and Social Practice*. Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press.
- Holm, L. (2009). *Heldagsskolen som uddannelsespolitisk initiativ. Tredje statusrapport 2008–2009*. [Full-day schools as education policy initiative. Third status report 2008-2009]. Retrieved 12.09.2013 from: <http://www.dpu.dk/om/larsh>
- Holm, L. (2008). *Heldagsskolen som uddannelsespolitisk initiativ. Anden statusrapport 2007–2008*. [Full-day schools as education policy initiative. Second status report 2007-2008]. Retrieved 12.09.2013 from www.dpu.dk/om/larsh
- Holm, L. and Valentin, K. (2007). *Heldagsskolen som uddannelsespolitisk initiativ. Første statusrapport 2006–2007*. [Full-day schools as education policy initiative. First status report 2006-2007]. Retrieved 12.09.2013 from <http://www.dpu.dk/om/larsh>
- Kolbe, F-U. (ed.) (2009). *Ganztagschule als symbolische Konstruktion. Fallanalysen zu Legitimationsdiskursen in schultheoretischer Perspektive*. [Full-day schools as symbolic constructions. Case-studies of discourses about legitimation in an educational perspective]. Wiesbaden, Germany: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- Laclau, E. and Mouffe, C. (2002). *Det radikale demokrati*. Copenhagen: Samfundslitteratur.
- Levinson, B. A. U. and Sutton, M. (2001). "Introduction: Policy as/in Practice", in M. Sutton and B. A. U. Levinson (eds.), *Policy as Practice. Toward a Comparative Socio-Cultural Analysis of Educational Policy*. Westport, Conn.: Ablex Publishing.
- Palludan, C. (2008). "Når 0.klasses elever skaber skole-hjem relationer" [When children from grade 0 creates school-home relations] In Kryger, N. (ed.), *Midtvejsrapport. Skole-hjem samarbejde som kulturel selvfølgelighed – en multi-sited etnografisk afdækning*: 96–108. [Midway report. School-home cooperations as a cultural given – a multi-sited ethnographic study] Retrieved 12.09.2013 from: <http://www.dpu.dk/om/cp>

- Shore, C. and Wright, S. (1997). "Policy: a new field of anthropology", in C. Shore and S. Wright (eds.), *Anthropology of Policy*. London: Routledge.
- Socialministeriet (2006). *Den almene boligsektors fremtid*. [The future of the social housing sector]. Copenhagen: Ministry of Social Affairs and Integration.
- Vertovec, S. (2007) Super-diversity and its implications. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29(6), 1024-1054.