

SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY PRACTICE AS CONFLICTUAL COLLABORATION

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Abstract

Reflecting on the role of the school/educational psychologist has been a core focus in school psychology research, however often considered separately from school professionals' perspectives. In the paper, we aim to transcend the tendency within school psychology research to treat the perspectives of the various parties who collaborate around school problems (e.g. teachers and school psychologists) separately. In continuation of this, we discuss the development of a knowledge hierarchy where technical rationality dominates at the expense of knowledge about everyday school practice. In school psychology, this development is illustrated by the application of a wide array of manuals and models for assessment and consultation where prescribed operational procedures often define the tasks of both school psychologists and school professionals at different stages of the collaboration. We present the concept of conflictual collaboration, grounded in critical psychology and social practice theory (Axel, 2020; Højholt & Kousholt, 2020) in order to encourage exploration of the different collaborating parties' perspectives and their interconnections in a common contradictory matter (to ensure a good school life for all children). Through an analytical focus on the different parties' structural conditions, their situated interplay, and their negotiations of possibilities for action in everyday practice, we hope to contribute to the development of school psychology practices that promote social justice. The paper draw on analyses from a qualitative research project examining interprofessional collaboration to support inclusion in Danish schools, as explored from the perspectives of teachers, pedagogues, school psychologists and educational-psychological consultants.

Keywords: *School psychology, conflictual collaboration, educational psychological services, interprofessional collaboration, knowledge hierarchies.*

1. Introduction

In this paper, we examine the collaboration between professionals from educational-psychological service (EPS) (school psychologists and educational-psychological consultants) and school professionals. Boyle and Lauchlan (2009) state that reflecting on the historical, actual and preferred role of the school psychologist has been a "*perennial obsession*" in school psychology research, while knowledge from the perspective of school professionals is under-represented or even overlooked (Borring, 2021). Furthermore, in the field of school psychology there is a tendency to view the perspectives of the various collaborating parties in isolation from one another. Our analyses of the historical development of school psychology indicate the development of a knowledge hierarchy where technical rationality dominates at the expense of knowledge about everyday school practices experienced from the perspectives of school professionals, parents, and students. We suggest the concept of conflictual collaboration (Axel, 2020; Højholt & Kousholt, 2020) to deal with this challenge of analyzing collaboration from the perspectives of several parties that collaborate from different positions with different tasks in relation to the children's school life. We draw on analyses from a qualitative research project that examine interprofessional collaboration to support inclusion and class communities in Danish schools, as experienced from the perspectives of school and EPS professionals. The analyses includes the different perspectives, interest, and positions of the collaborating parties and address their conditions for collaboration. Through an analytical focus on the different parties' structural conditions, their situated interplay, and their negotiations of possibilities for action in everyday practice, we hope to contribute to the development of school psychology practices that promote social justice. Hage et al. (2018) highlight inclusion, collaboration and equal access as core values of social justice in pursuit of

more democratic and egalitarian societies. We follow this conceptualization of social justice by examining interprofessional collaboration considering how collaborative knowledge making can be organized in ways that promote social justice and democratic principles. The context for the analyses is contemporary tendencies in school psychology in a Danish setting, where there has been a growing interest in more practice-near ways of organizing interprofessional collaboration between school and EPS professionals.

2. Rationalities in EPS services in a historical perspective

Lunt and Major (2000) have analyzed the professionalization of school psychology, arguing that a technical rationality has developed within the field whereby professional activities primarily consist of instrumental problem-solving and where the standardization and instrumentalization of knowledge has been a hallmark of school psychologists' work with school-based assessments. Donald Schön (1983) developed the concept of technical rationality in order to describe how a positivist epistemology dominates professional knowledge and action, where problems in professional practices are solved through predetermined solutions and actions. Schön criticized the paradigm of technical rationality for its instrumentalization of knowledge, ignoring the complexity, uncertainty, instability and conflicts of interest that are embedded in professional practices (Schön & Schön, 1983, p. 40). In school psychology, technical rationality is illustrated by the development of a wide array of manuals and models for assessment and consultation. Many of these models prescribe operational procedures that define the tasks of both school psychologists and school professionals at different stages of the collaboration (Bellinger et al., 2016; Doll et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2018). Consultation approaches and models differ in various ways, but they often use similar terminology and frame interactions between EPS and school professionals as consultant-consultee relations, often with a goal of standardizing and operationalizing collaboration. Glancing back in time shows that the notion of EPS and school professionals as consultants and consultees, respectively, has contributed to a strong emphasis on school psychologists' and consultants' perspectives because of a historical importance afforded to the role and responsibilities of the consultant. In the consultative approach to collaboration, school professionals and parents are often perceived as change agents, responsible for helping and supporting children. In the literature, paradoxically, it is primarily the role of EPS professionals that is scrutinized and detailed. This focus on EPS professionals' perspectives and the development of and adherence to prescribed procedures and models means that subjective experiences and perspectives from the everyday lives of school professionals, parents and children are often excluded from the collaboration or marginalized, attributed only anecdotal significance (Røn Larsen & Højholt, 2019).

Mercieca (2009) and Rasmussen (2010) question the role of school psychologists as experts when collaborating with school professionals. Instead, they advocate for greater attention to professional uncertainty, to improvisation and to a common exploration of the complexities of school problems. Within this framework, differences, contradictions, and inconsistencies are conceived as central aspects of the school. Such an approach encourages interprofessional collaboration that is more open, explorative and emerging – where perspectives from everyday school life as experienced by school professionals, parents and children are included as essential knowledge.

3. A 'practice-near turn' in school psychology

The current functions of school psychologists and EPS consultants in the western world covers a vast array of tasks, such as assessment, therapy, consultation, and interventions that target individual children, teachers, and parents. At the same time, there has been an increased focus on creating inclusive educational environments through consultations and interventions targeting groups of children and teachers, and through whole-school approaches. In Denmark, EPS are under municipal jurisdiction and provide services across mainstream and specialized day care institutions and schools. In Denmark, EPS have two overall objectives: to contribute to the development of inclusive school environments, where as many children as possible can learn and develop within mainstream education; and to provide input and expert knowledge in assessing cases involving individual children and their need for additional resources and support (Undervisningsministeriet, 2000). In the research literature, many challenges are associated with different forms of collaboration between school and EPS professionals, such as criticism of the tendency to focus interventions on a single child in isolation and difficulties in the consultative approach when transferring knowledge from a meeting room and into the classrooms. A consensus seems to have emerged within contemporary research that perceives school psychologists' role in schools as having moved away from primarily conducting psychometric assessments of individual children, instead adopting a more consultation-based approach with a greater focus on school professionals' work with

children (Ahtola & Kiiski-Mäki, 2014; Mendes et al., 2017). While school psychologists have historically been perceived as experts on educational and psychological issues, at the same time, there has been ongoing debate as how best to translate this expertise into relevant support structures for students (Mercieca, 2009; Nolan & Moreland, 2014; Nugent et al., 2014; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). In Denmark, this historical tendency has brought about a new demand that school psychologists embrace a more ‘practice-near’ position, in the sense of developing more relevant interventions in close collaboration with school professionals. This entails moving the collaboration between school and EPS professionals out of traditional assessment and consultation settings and into classrooms. Such collaboration involves increased focus on children’s communities instead of individual children, and on developing expertise in close collaboration with school professionals (Borring, 2021). A similar development can be seen outside Denmark, where various *multi-tiered systems of support* (MTSS) such as *response to intervention* (RTI) have moved collaboration between school and EPS professionals closer to the classrooms with a focus on prevention and early intervention (Eagle et al., 2015; Little et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2018). However, as the analysis will illustrate the practice-near approach to collaboration and the ambition to get closer to the everyday life of school is in Denmark affiliated with dilemmas.

4. Conflictual collaboration

We have found that the concept of *conflictual collaboration*, grounded in critical psychology and social practice theory (Axel, 2020; Højholt & Kousholt, 2020), can help transcend the tendency in school psychology to view the perspectives of the various collaborating parties in isolation from one another and the development of a knowledge hierarchy where technical rationality dominates at the expense of knowledge about everyday school life. This conceptualization of collaboration emphasizes that, when collaborating, people must deal with different perspectives on, interests in and different knowledge on what the collaboration is about, and there is therefore always a risk of conflict in collaboration (Axel, 2011; Højholt & Kousholt, 2020). People collaborate to address a range of societal problems and issues in social practices, which can be conceptualized as common matters. People are connected through the common matters in which they participate. The common matter at the core of interprofessional collaboration between school and EPS professionals can be characterized as the creation of an inclusive environment where all children can learn, develop and thrive. The work related to this common matter is multifaceted, and contradictory (Axel, 2020; Højholt & Kousholt, 2020). As a complex societal practice, school is comprised of many aspects—learning, development, assessment, collaboration, inclusion, preparing children for participation in society etc.—that school professionals must address and somehow integrate to make everyday school life work (Højholt & Kousholt, 2018). Exploring interprofessional collaboration from this perspective involves exploring the different perspectives of the collaborating parties and their concrete conditions and reasons for taking part in the collaboration in specific ways.

The following analyses is based on a qualitative research project conducted by the first author (CGB) that examines interprofessional collaboration between school and EPS professionals in Danish public schools. In this project, various collaborations are explored from the perspectives of both school and EPS professionals through participant observations and interviews. During one year of fieldwork, CGB observed EPS professionals in their work with assessment, consultation and practice-near collaboration across different schools and daycare institutions, as well as observing teachers’ work, encompassing teaching, preparation of lessons, various meetings, breaks, in-service training and professional development activities and different forms of collaboration with EPS professionals.

5. School problems from different perspectives

The concept of conflictual collaboration draws analytical attention to school problems conceived as a complex common matter where children, parents, school professionals and managers often have very different perspectives on how to understand the problems and in different ways have struggled for a long period to find solutions. Seen from the perspective of the EPS professionals, the practice-near form of collaboration is an ambition to work in more contextually grounded ways with interventions (working with children’s communities in the classroom instead of assessing and testing individual children). The new form of collaboration is also an ambition to be more relevant for the school professionals. Working in the classroom is for many EPS-professional a new form of collaboration and it is therefore affiliated with professional uncertainty. Several of the EPS-professionals talks about their insecurity and dilemmas of ‘showing up empty-handed’ (because they do not have a test or predefined tasks). The practice-near collaboration therefor often takes the form where the EPS-professionals act as external providers on different models and methods that are brought into the classroom (e.g. co-teaching or methods for conflict resolution). Another reason for this is that such programs or models are endorsed and promoted by the

municipal strategy about inclusion in schools. Despite the intention of the collaboration to be closer to and more relevant for the school professionals, in several cases conflicts arise between the school and EPS professionals. Often the school professionals highlight the teachers' resistance to the interventions as barriers in the collaboration. From the teacher's perspectives, based on interviews and observations, the reason for their apparent resistance can, however, be understood in the light of their working conditions and the history of the school problems, that EPS professional are brought in to contribute to solve. During observations and in interviews the teachers report e.g. how they in a class have made various efforts to solve children's conflicts by working with strengthen children's communities in and outside the classroom. This includes talking to the children about diversity, and about conflict resolutions in class and during breaks. The teachers organize group play during breaks to ensure every child has someone to play with, and they arrange different role-play exercises in the classroom that focus on conflicts in the children's communities. From the teachers' perspective, the conflicts between the children are not restricted to the classroom where the collaboration is located. Furthermore, the teachers describe that a part of the problem are frustrated parents who in different ways try to engage in and handle the school problems, e.g., arranging play groups or stay at the school (outside the classroom) because some children refused to go to school unless their parents joined them. The parent also had disputes on social media about which children was to blame for the school problems. The teachers described how the conflicts between children was linked to transitions to or the time in the after-school center.

Knowledge from the teachers' perspective illustrate how the conflicts in the classroom are connected to different aspects outside the class room and involves other contexts and situations that influence everyday school practices. However, in the cases CGB followed, this type of knowledge about school problems experienced from the school professionals was not brought into the collaboration.

The above elaboration of different perspectives on school problems provides a broader insight in what is at stake in conflicts and how they are connected to other situations, concerns and perspectives. Exploring the social history of conflicts (Schwartz, 2019) draws attention to how conflicts in school are connected to the contradictory conditions of everyday school life. However, the collaboration between EPS and school professionals often does not explore or address the social history of the conflicts. Instead, the collaboration become focused on implementing the program in the 'correct way'. Despite the intention of establishing a more equal and exploratory collaboration, this positioning of the EPS professionals as experts that provide an intervention based on ideas of technical rationality seem to be reproduced. During the various meetings the teachers did not voice their knowledge from everyday life regarding the pervasiveness of the conflicts and their previous experience in trying to find solutions. Such knowledge could have introduced new perspectives on the complexity of the conflicts and how to organize collaboration in response.

6. Conclusion

With this analysis, we hope to have indicated how working with a conceptualization of conflictual collaboration in relation to common contradictory matters can draw attention to the complex cross-contextual social history of conflicts. In continuation hereof, concepts such as 'professional uncertainty' (Mercieca, 2009) and 'improvisation' (Rasmussen, 2010) in common explorations of the complexities of school problems can enable perspectives on interprofessional that is more open and explorative where perspectives from everyday school life as experienced by school professionals as well as parents and children are included. Such explorative collaborative processes can, in turn, contribute to more comprehensive and contextualized understandings of what school problems are about where different perspectives and disagreements are explored and analyzed as contradictory aspects of the social practice in which school and EPS professionals collaborate. We hope to have illustrated how the concept of conflictual collaboration opens for such analysis of interprofessional collaboration and for exploration of social conflicts from different perspectives and in connection with the contradictory conditions of everyday school life. We see a potential for such analysis to contribute to a democratization of knowledge and, in that respect, to a movement towards interprofessional collaboration that promotes social justice.

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