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## **New perspectives on the positioning of parents in children's bullying at school**

In this article, I explore the subject of parents with respect to children's bullying at school. The overarching claim is that parental agency and positions on children's bullying at school are produced and made possible by an *apparatus* of multiple, concurrent forces that provide poor conditions for a constructive partnership between parents and schools in cases of bullying. This research adds to the existing literature in the field by suggesting that the connections between schools, parents and their children's social behaviour at school must be seen as complexly entangled and involving a range of forces at local, societal and political levels. Furthermore, based on an emergent research design, the article contributes to the discussion of post-qualitative research, drawing upon varied, qualitative empirical material and analytically experimenting with combining Adele Clarke's (2005) idea of *situational analysis* and Karen Barad's (2007) concepts of *intra-action* and *apparatus*.

**Keywords:** School bullying; parents; home-school cooperation; situational analysis; intra-action; post-qualitative research.

By: Nina Hein<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

As a part of the research group *eXbus* (Exploring Bullying in Schools), I previously conducted a study that focused on the experiences of parents whose children (had) felt bullied at school (Hein 2009/2014). In this study, twelve qualitative interviews with parents were produced to obtain insights into parental perspectives on the subject of 'parental positions and perspectives on children's bullying at school'. These interviews displayed some staggering, distinct patterns in parents' experiences of trying to help their children escape their marginalised position at school. I gained insight into the intense sense of powerlessness experienced by these parents, following their long and futile attempts to help their children in cooperation with the school. The interviews showed how the parents' approaches to the school became the beginning of a long series of events which, rather than helping the bullied children, aggravated their feelings of insufficiency, exclusion and powerlessness and produced a similar reaction in the parents.

The experience of most of the parents was that, despite their children's reports of being bullied, the teachers rejected the idea that the children were victims of bullying at school. This appeared

to be due to the fact that the children's behaviour among their peers at school did not match the way bullying, bullies, and victims were characterised in the school's definition of bullying. This definition of bullying, which is usually part of the Danish school's compulsory<sup>ii</sup> anti-bullying strategy, seemed to be widely used as a tool to determine who could and who could not be recognised and acknowledged as 'real' victims of bullying. Most often, teachers or principals applied this definition to reject the idea that a certain situation was one of bullying. Instead, the problems were explained away as either typical gender- or age-related relational problems – 'girls gossip' and 'boys will be boys' – or the problem was interpreted as having something to do with the child's *personality* (Hein 2009/2014).

It was not only the children's reactions and behaviour that were interpreted and explained with reference to social categories or personality features; their parents, who attempted to help their children escape their marginalised and vulnerable positions at school, were also evaluated and understood as belonging to categories of cultural understanding that explained their behaviours and reactions: They were classed as *overprotective* parents, as modern '*curling parents*',<sup>iii</sup> as *quarrelsome* parents, or as parents trying to escape their responsibility for their children's personal problems (ibid.).

During the (often long) dialogue between parents and schools, the main issue generally became a struggle to define the child's reality at school: was he/she a victim of 'real bullying' and thereby entitled to assistance from the school,<sup>iv</sup> or could the problems instead be explained with reference to the child's personality, age, gender, or parents and thereby the responsibility for resolving the matter devolved to the parents?

This study suggests that communication between parents and schools regarding bullying has a tendency to produce powerlessness rather than solutions and to let down the vulnerable child. Such an insight gave rise to a new focus on the kinds of questions it would be interesting to ask in this field. One of these questions concerns how to understand the dynamics underlying the counter-productivity of the meetings between parents and schools in situations concerning bullying. The aim of this article is to provide a possible answer to this question.

The article begins with an outline of the main features of the international research on the role of parents with respect to bullying at school followed by an introduction to the basic ontological

assumptions and theoretical tools employed in this study. It then presents and accounts for the main findings of an analysis of a diverse range of publicly available written material (including newspaper articles, bills, memoranda, popular literature and campaign material) on national educational policy, which I conducted in 2012 (Hein 2012); this includes the visions for and challenges of Danish state schools as well as the role that parents can play in their children's lives at school (in general) and in issues of bullying at school (in particular). I argue that the understanding of bullying in Danish schools that was prevalent at the time intra-acted (I describe this term below) with concurrent political concerns for the international, competitive position of Danish trade and industry following the disappointing results of Denmark's first participation in PISA<sup>v</sup> 2000. I suggest that this intra-action produced new possible understandings of, and positions for, parents with regard to children's bullying at school.

Against the backdrop of the aforementioned findings, I then proceed to outline sociologist Adele Clarke's idea of *Situational analysis* (2005) and to argue for the fruitfulness of combining this empirical-analytical tool with Karen Barad's (2007) theoretical concepts of *intra-action* and *apparatus*. I then use this combination to analyse data from a case study of bullying. Here, I show how the production machinery (the *apparatus* – this concept will be explained below) that comprises research discourses and popular discourses, educational policies and legislation both produces and is reproduced at a local, situational level of productive meetings (*intra-actions* – this concept will be explained below) between human and non-human forces entangled in the meeting between parents and schools.

In contrast to the hypothesis-testing approach, which dominates the research field and is based on the assumption that children involved in bullying have specific, problematic family backgrounds, and in contrast to studies that take a more holistic, humanistic approach to their the subject matter, this study is based on neither a pre-established methodological framework nor the understanding of stable, separate human or non-human beings. Instead, this study is designed to explore the subject matter through an *emergent approach*, which does not follow a particular analytic method but allows the on-going empirical and theoretical insights produced to inform the succeeding steps of data production and further analytical questions.<sup>vi</sup> In line with the arguments made by Chamberlain (2000), the overall aim of this type of methodological approach is to

develop and apply the methods appropriate for answering the research questions rather than to focus upon employing the 'proper' or 'correct' methods.

Ontologically, the underlying assumptions of the study are inspired by poststructuralist (Michel Foucault, Judith Butler), post-qualitative (Patti Lather & Elizabeth St. Pierre 2013; Lisa Mazzei 2013) and new materialist thought (Karen Barad 2007; Elizabeth St. Pierre et al. 2016), which suggests that human and non-human existences such as bullies, victims, school structures and architecture, psychological understandings, popular discourses, teachers, and different kinds of parents must be studied as parts of on-going processes of mutual constitution and becoming agents rather than as separate entities that influence each other (Barad 2007).

In conclusion, this article picks up on the different points concerning the ways in which educational policies and the dominating understandings of parents' actions and responsibilities with regard to bullying at school may be seen as constitutive parts of an apparatus leading to powerlessness among parents, children, and school staff alike.

### **The literature**

The international literature in the field of parental positions on children's bullying at school is dominated by the perspective that bullies and victims of bullying have typical problems at home that may explain their behaviour at school. These mostly quantitative approaches focus on parents' methods of child-rearing and the nature of their emotional attachment to their children as the root causes of bullying behaviour. Broadly speaking, this literature suggests that parents of children involved in bullying – whether as perpetrators, victims, or in a combined bully/victim position – probably have problems with what is termed 'poor family function' (Smith and Myron-Wilson 1998). This perspective on the role of parents in children's bullying is underpinned by a widespread individualised and psychological understanding of bullying as interactions that take place between children with distinctive, difficult personalities (Schott 2014).<sup>vii</sup> This approach to bullying originated in the work of the Scandinavian psychologist Dan Olweus, who was also the first to explicitly tie children's bullying to their parents' approaches to parenting.

Olweus (1980) designated a group of boys, whose pattern of behaviour he described as 'aggressive', as 'bullies', and he focused on the connection between the boys' behaviour and the

nurture and care these boys had (or had not) received from their primary caregivers. Later, in a study that focused specifically on the profile of the victimised child (Olweus 1993), Olweus described the problematic relationship between parents and their children as leading to the child's position as a victim of bullying. In a review, Nickerson et al. (2010) summarise the focus and results of research contributions in the field:

Although this is a relatively new area of inquiry, the existing research concerning parent-child relationships reveals some consistent trends. Bullies are more likely to have avoidant attachment styles and distant, less supportive relationships with parents. In addition, parents of bullies are more likely than parents of other children to use physical means of discipline and to lack warmth and empathy. Victims also have insecure attachment styles, though they may be either avoidant or ambivalent. In contrast to bullies' distant relationship with parents, passive victims and boys, in particular, tend to have overly close and emotionally intense relationships with parents. (2010, 192)

As the quotation highlights, the research has focused on the connections between bullying and children's attachment to their parents, and the parenting strategies of the parents (for a recent meta-analysis with similar conclusions, see Lereya, Samara and Wolke 2013). Thus, the basis of this research is the assumption that children's involvement in patterns of bullying at school may be seen as closely linked to various conditions and relationships at home. As Herne (2014) points out, the significant amount of evidence that has been gathered to support the claim that maladaptive parenting increases the risk of children becoming involved in bullying situations has given rise to numerous recommendations for family-based interventions that focus on improving parenting skills:

From this perspective, parents are understood to have a responsibility to reduce the risk of their children becoming either 'bullies' or 'victims' by adopting specific parenting practices as recommended in research. (5)

In the past fifteen years, alternative approaches to the focus upon family functions have entered the field. Based on a socio-ecological approach, a significant number of these contributions seek to understand bullying as a reflection of features in the interrelated system of social and physical environments in which the children participate:

When the ecological perspective is applied to bullying, a bullying interaction occurs not only because of individual characteristics of the child who is bullying, but also because of actions of peers, actions of teachers and other adult caretakers at school, physical characteristics of the school grounds, family factors, cultural characteristics, and even community factors. (Swearer and Doll 2001, 10)

From this perspective, problems of bullying do not stem from the child or from the home / school / cultural environment *alone* but are seen as the result of on-going transactions between them (ibid.). From a socio-ecological perspective, parents are understood as one of a range of interrelated 'micro-systems' that may have more or less direct influence on the development of bullying behaviours (also see Espelage and Swearer 2010; Hong and Espelage 2012; Swearer and Espelage 2004). This research shows that several factors come into play in the production of bullying, but it reproduces some of the mainstream assumptions of the field; for example, that some children are predisposed to become bullies because of their lack of empathy and their aggressive and dominant natures, which is caused by having bad role model parents (cf. Swearer and Doll 2001).

In the last decade, a small body of qualitative research has contributed to the research field with insights into the experiences and perspectives of parents whose children have been bullied at school (see Mishna et al. 2006; Harvey 2009; Hein, 2009; Sawyer et al. 2011; Brown et al. 2013). These studies provide a range of insights into parents' experiences with, perceptions of, and reactions to bullying (see Harcourt et al. 2014 for a review), and they all emphasise the sense of powerlessness experienced by parents with regard to school bullying. However, as pointed out by Herne (2014), a limitation of these studies is that they provide little analysis of how such experiences of powerlessness may be produced within broader systems of power (ibid. 8).

The study presented in this article adds to the literature by providing an analysis of how the powerlessness experienced by parents in home-school communication surrounding bullying is produced in a broader system of entangled forces – the *apparatus* (Barad 2007). As mentioned above, this approach does not seem to have been employed in the literature until now.

### **The onto-epistemological starting point**

Perspectives on parents' roles and responsibilities related to children's bullying are closely connected to the existing perspective on the phenomenon of bullying itself. As one of the ambitions of the research presented here is to widen the mainstream perspective on the role of parents with regard to school bullying, it is coupled with an understanding of children's bullying that transgresses the perspective on bullying as something that occurs between certain kinds of children. Søndergaard (2012) and Søndergaard & Schott (2014, 2–3) focus on rethinking the understanding of bullying at school and draw upon the work of Karen Barad (2007) to frame bullying as a social phenomenon produced by processes of mutually constituting entangled forces.<sup>viii</sup> When employing such a de-essentialising and causality-perforating theoretical perspective, studying children's (and adults') statements and behaviours in specific contexts as expressions of their *personalities* becomes irrelevant. Instead, this is viewed as an enactment of subject positions, narratives and practices that are meaningful at a particular time and in a particular place.

With the concept of *apparatus* from Barad (2007), a given time and place may be understood as a part of a borderless whole of entangled material-discursive forces that produce meaning, phenomenon and subjects. Barad (2007) writes:

*(...) apparatuses produce differences that matter – they are boundary-making practices that are formative of matter and meaning, productive of, and part of, the phenomenon produced' (145). And further: '(...) apparatuses are the material conditions of possibility and impossibility of mattering; they enact what matters and what is excluded from mattering. (148)*

In Barad's terminology, an apparatus is a machinery that produces phenomena, meaningful boundaries and possible subjects. The understanding of Barad's (2007) notion of *apparatus* also implicates the concept of *intra-action* and the concept of the *material-discursive* (both with a hyphen). The concept of intra-action is presented as an alternative to the concept of *interaction*, which assumes the presence of separate, individual entities interacting. With the concept of *intra-action*, Barad (2007) seeks to emphasise that the demarcation and fixation of separate elements is produced *in the meeting* between different forces in a given apparatus: identities, categories and all kinds of human and non-human agencies are brought into existence in and by the intra-action



itself. The 'bully' and the 'victim' do not exist as meaningful categories prior to their intra-action in a specific apparatus that produces meaning and matter. The 'quarrelsome parent' does not enter the school as a quarrelsome parent and start *interacting* as such with the school staff but is enacted as a certain kind of 'modern parent' in the *intra-actions* with the similarly enacted school staff in a certain apparatus. On this line of thinking, there is no fixed dividing line between the different forces we often recognise as separate entities in the world (Barad 2007). This also applies to the understanding of materiality and discourse (or representation), which constitutes an interconnected and pivotal point in Barad's (2007) line of thinking. Barad uses the concept of the *material-discursive* to claim that what is 'discursive' and what is 'material' cannot be separated but must instead be understood as entangled:

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*(...) materiality is discursive (...) just as discursive practices are always already material (...). Neither discursive practices nor material phenomena are ontologically or epistemologically prior. Neither can be explained in terms of the other. Neither is reducible to the other. (...) matter and meaning are mutually articulated. (152)*

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In contrast to basic humanist assumptions, from this perspective, materiality is conceived as exhibiting agency and productivity in concert with the human and not only when acted upon by an intentional human agent (St. Pierre et al. 2016). Furthermore, on my reading of Barad's concept of matter and materiality, *an expectation, a memory, a discourse or a practice* brought into a situation matters as much as an actual material *object* might. Like material objects, *an expectation* or a discourse may be present and highly performative in intra-actions with other forces in the situation, producing conditions of possibility for the human and non-human agents involved. This de-essentialising and causality dissolving theoretical entry entails a methodological approach that halts the search for authenticity, causes and truth. Instead, the focus of the research becomes an exploration of how phenomena, demarcations, knowledge and subject positions both produce and are produced in complex, material-discursive processes.

In this study, the data generated primarily consist of interviews, observations and written media documents. Importantly, following Mazzei (2013), this data was not generated to obtain the *authentic voices* of individual, essentialist and agential subjects but to map connectives between the understandings, norms, desires, demarcations and expectations that were expressed and

employed by the various participants and intra-acted in an on-going production of truths and subjects. In this post-humanist approach to using interviews, conceptualised by Mazzei (2013) as *Voice without Organs (VwO)*, voice is decoupled (ibid., 734) from an intentional, agential humanist subject, and agency is sought in the intra-actions of multiple human and non-human forces in complex networks, which I, following Barad (2007), have conceptualised as *apparatuses*. Since I am primarily interested in the possible agency of parents in children's bullying at school, in this study, I focus on the experiences described by parents and school staff in an attempt to discover what makes sense and what matters to them; how they experience the possible subject positions and conditions of possibilities of themselves and others. With this approach, I aim to gain insight into both the apparatus producing these interpretations and possible beings and into the consequences and conditions of this apparatus for parents, pupils and schools.

### **The apparatus**

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The following section describes the main findings of an analysis (Hein, 2012) of a diverse range of publicly available written material on national educational policy and on parents' roles and responsibilities in children's school life (in general) and in the issue of bullying at school (in particular). This analysis examined the ways in which parents had been represented and positioned in a variety of information and policy campaign material, in the wording of educational legislation, in the media, and in other popular texts since the turn of the millennium. It investigated which discourses about parents predominate and it explored the connections between these discourses and other material-discursive elements, such as the Danish participation in PISA, government educational policy strategies, and research on bullying as intra-active forces.

Since a thorough exposition of this analysis<sup>ix</sup> is beyond the scope of this article, the account below aims to provide a sketch of the pillars of an *apparatus* that produce understandings, boundaries, demarcations and conditions of possibility for parents of children being bullied at school. The account of the analysis aims to show how educational policy and dominant discourses about bullying and modern parents intra-act to produce a reality that leaves little chance of a constructive dialogue between home and school.

### ***Parents rejecting their responsibilities***

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Until Denmark's first participation in PISA in 2000, the preamble of Danish state school principles was characterised by a focus on the versatile development of the pupils. This included building confidence in the pupils' own abilities and the development of imagination, contemplation and initiative. It focused on preparing pupils for participatory democracy, shared responsibility, rights, and duties in a society built on freedom and democracy.<sup>x</sup> Following the first Danish participation in PISA, concern over the disappointing results of the Danish pupils compared with pupils from neighbouring countries resulted in taking a new line on national educational policy. Since the beginning of this millennium, a general aim of Danish educational policy has been to upgrade the academic content and measurable results at state schools. In conjunction with this aim, efforts have been made to establish a clear distinction between what is understood as *academic* and what is understood as *social* at school and to clearly designate the two as distinct areas of responsibility. In this process, schools have attempted to delimit their primary responsibility as strictly academic and have introduced various tests, evaluations, and (inter)national comparisons of the school's academic results, which have put severe pressure on the teachers' and school administrators' performance. Parents are now expected to assume responsibility for what is understood as the 'social aspects' of school life, which, according to this logic, covers everything that is not 'academic' (Hein 2012).

As part of the attempt to establish and legitimise this distribution of responsibilities between home and school (sustaining and justifying the state school's binding and narrow focus on academic optimisation), in 2002, the 'sliding of responsibilities from parents to school and society at large' was presented politically<sup>xi</sup> as a problem that needed to be solved.<sup>xii</sup> The representation and construction of *the problem* in this way established the basis of a (now widespread) Danish understanding of modern parents as rejecting their parental responsibilities and gave rise to a popular category of 'responsibility-disclaiming parents', which is widely used in Danish media texts about the issue. This category is relatively versatile. In part, it includes those parents who seek to outsource the responsibility for the upbringing of their children to the school for the sake of their own careers or as a result of their own immature character (a consequence of the so-called "spoiled generation") (see Lange 2007). But, owing to a 2005<sup>xiii</sup> act to strengthen the responsibilities of the parents of socially vulnerable children, the category has also come to include socioeconomically disadvantaged parents,<sup>xiv</sup> whose children are widely identified as being

disruptive and low performers at school, owing to their poor upbringing and their parents' lack of involvement (Hein 2012).

Concurrent with the political focus on parents' responsibilities for their children's school life that began around 2000, awareness of *bullying* arose in the Danish school system. Schools and government educational organisations obtained their understandings of the phenomenon from the dominant researcher in this area, Dan Olweus, whose perspectives on bullying and parents' roles in their children's bullying (cf. the above literature review) formed the basis of how the core of the problem was understood in the field. Intra-acting with the prevailing political discourses about sliding responsibilities from home to school, the increased attention on bullying among Danish pupils also produced a strong focus on parental responsibilities (Hein 2012, 165–166).

#### ***Demanding consumer parents and new oppositions between home and school***

As part of a new Danish political strategy called 'The State School of the future' (2006),<sup>xv</sup> a range of tests and evaluations was implemented to measure the academic accomplishments of pupils and schools. These tests and evaluations were politically articulated as tools that *parents* could reference when approaching the schools if their child's attainment was below average or, implicitly, if the child's teacher and school were not performing satisfactorily. This gave rise to the currently prevalent category (in Denmark) of *demanding consumer parents* (Hein 2012). In this process, the relationship between school and parents was reconstituted. This was done by allocating subject positions in which the school and its teachers were the ones to ensure that the pupils' measurable academic achievements improved in accordance with fixed goals, and the parents were appointed the double task of 1: ensuring that their children behaved appropriately at school, and 2: monitoring the quality of the goods and services supplied by the school. This produced an opposition between parents and teachers, positioning parents as *consumers* of the goods provided by the schools, and, as such, *controllers* of the teachers' academic performance. In this process, the teachers were appointed to the position of adjudicators of the parents' appropriate upbringing of their children, assessing whether parents were parenting appropriately or whether they should perhaps be offered a place in a 'family class'.<sup>xvi</sup>

#### ***Distribution of responsibilities and conditions for home-school communication concerning bullying***

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In Denmark, the division between the academic responsibilities of the school and the social and behavioural responsibilities of parents is legally excepted when the matter is explicitly one of *bullying*. Today, when a child's relational problems at school can be defined as bullying, Danish schools are legally committed to implementing a plan of action.<sup>xvii</sup> The personality and/or upbringing of the individual child or the parents' social behaviour may still be identified as (part of) the cause of the problem, but, in this case, it is formally the school's responsibility to take action and to attempt to resolve the problem. However, as pointed out above, this specific, formal allocation of responsibility creates a problematic focus upon whether or not a given situation may be defined as *real bullying*, initiating the home-school dialogue, and producing a sense of powerlessness in all parties, as previously described (Hein 2014).

It seems that three of the many forces currently comprising what we might call 'an apparatus of home-school cooperation in Denmark' have particularly strengthened each other intra-actively and may be said to comprise the current pillars of a machinery producing understandings, demarcations, and possible subject positions for parents of children involved in bullying entering into dialogue with the school. These three forces concern 1: the dominant and popularised research discourses on bullying and the role of parents therein; 2: Danish educational policies in the new millennium, and, as a part of this; 3: the popular – and politically fed – discourses about *modern parents*.

In the following section, I present an analysis of a case in which parents and a school were involved in handling a situation of apparent bullying. The point of the analysis is twofold. Firstly, it aims to illustrate how the attempted cooperation between parents and school in a specific case of bullying is produced in and conditioned by forces of the apparatus sketched above; secondly, it aims to show how local elements and forces, specific to this particular situation, enter into the apparatus and start new processes of productive intra-actions. This latter point suggests the relevance of bringing together some of the analytical ideas from Adele Clarke's *Situational analysis* (2005) and Karen Barad's theoretical concepts of *intra-activity* and *apparatus* (2007). Before turning to the analysis, I present the most relevant features of these theoretical-methodological ideas and their combination for the purpose of this study.

### ***The situational analysis***

Taking Adele Clarke's (2005) perspectives of 'the situation' as the central unit of analysis, a given socio-cultural situation may be approached as a dynamic, open-ended whole, consisting of numerous different concurrent and mutually constituting elements. With a 'situational analysis', the focus is on the specific situation of interest, and finding answers to what constitutes meaning, coherence, and agency in the situation involves not only in the knowing subject but also analysing the specific elements of the situation and the relations between them. Instead of involving theoretical speculation about the potential impact of different macro-levels, this type of insight is sought empirically and made tangible by focusing attention on how the *consequences* of different societal, material, discursive, or economic conditions may manifest themselves in the data on the situation of interest. In this way, a given discourse or a given school's policy only becomes relevant to the analysis to the extent that it is apparent in the data that this particular discourse or policy is of direct or indirect consequence in the situation. Essentially, the method of 'situational analysis' is based on thorough descriptions of a given situation, which produces different types of 'situational maps'. In the current analysis, the type of map primarily employed is the '*messy map*' (Clarke 2005). These maps outline the situation in focus and include all the elements from the empirical material that might be relevant to the question under investigation, without any structuring or editorialising. The elements of a 'messy map' may be sorted and categorised on the basis of analytical aims (*ibid.*). However, with the realisation that any situation is always in flux and may never be (truth)fully described, and in an effort to stay as analytically open as possible for as long as possible, this study has remained with the messy maps. This has allowed for an on-going analytical understanding of the situation as a truly messy piece of everyday life, composed of multiple, mutually constitutive elements.

### ***Intra-actions, the material-discursive and the notion of apparatus***

The explicit aim of a situational analysis is to make it possible to grasp the way in which everything in a given situation forms part of mutually constitutive processes. This notion of mutual constitution can be strengthened by applying Barad's concept of *intra-action* (2007), which I presented above. This concept may sharpen the analytical eye to the way in which meaning and matter of a particular, local situation are produced in the intra-actions among words, things,

practices, feelings, memories, policies, events, and discourses present in the situation. Thus, it is in the intra-action in a local situation – between a pupil’s behaviour at school and a specific, (folk-) psychological understanding of children’s development – that both the behaviour and the psychological understanding that aims to explain and present it gains *situated* matter and meaning and becomes a powerful agent, indicating directions for the continuing meaning/matter-making of the situation.

When fully unfolded, Clarke’s analytical concept of *the situation* (2005) is, to a certain extent, parallel to Barad’s more philosophical concept of *the apparatus* (2007) described above. In the analysis of the case below, Barad’s concept of apparatus is used as a notion of the larger machinery producing and being (re)produced by the local situation.

By using *messy maps*, it is possible to display everything that is potentially part of the answers to the questions: ‘What *matters* in this situation?’ and ‘What constitutes the genesis of truths and reality in this situation?’ I therefore included on these messy maps everything known about the situation without any ordering of the different levels: including e-mail conversations, past and present incidents, expressed feelings and understandings, manifestations of power, implicit and explicit references to various discourses, binaries, laws, obligations, economic conditions, shared memories and physical appearances. I analysed the intra-actions between all these elements in an attempt to explore the *productivity* of the intra-actions, which I then subsequently added to the map as further elements intra-acting in the situation.

### **Jonathan’s situation**

The analysis outlined below centres around thirteen-year-old Jonathan, who, over the course of a few months, felt excluded and mocked by his five previously best friends in his class. The analysis is based on the observation of a parent meeting about the situation and interviews with the boys’ class teacher, the school principal, and two of the parents involved in the matter.

Essentially, the principal and the boys’ class teacher refused to recognise the situation as one of *bullying*. Instead, they interpreted the problems among the boys as a consequence of problems related to Jonathan’s low self-esteem, which the principal believed was the result of his parents’ divorce six years earlier. Initially, the other parents involved in this situation generally agreed that

Jonathan was being mistreated and excluded by their boys, and that, as parents, they and the school would have to do something to address the situation. However, as the process unfolded, the situation eventually became generally accepted by the group of parents as a matter of Jonathan's problematic personality and his parents' refusal to take responsibility for it.

### ***Divisions of responsibilities***

The dialogue between the parents and the school began when the parents of the boys, who comprised a long-established group of six school friends, received an e-mail from Jonathan's father. In this e-mail, he described how, over the past months, Jonathan had been excluded and bullied by the other boys in the group. The other parents were stunned by Jonathan's father's e-mail. They had experienced numerous frustrating struggles with their thirteen-year-old sons exploring the limits of appropriate behaviour over the preceding year, and they were beginning to worry about their boys' paths. One of the interviewed parents, Marcus's mother, who was well aware that something was going on in the group of boys, was shocked to find out about how her son had been acting towards his once best friend. She had, however, also noticed that Marcus was happier about school and seemed better integrated with the group of boys since he started seeing more of Gustav than Jonathan. In the days following Jonathan's father's e-mail, Marcus's mother found herself at the centre of an intense phone debate among the frustrated parents involved. She sensed that the group of parents would not be able to solve this on their own, and she believed that the parents and the school should cooperate in their joint aim to stop the harassing and exclusion of Jonathan at school. She therefore forwarded Jonathan's father's e-mail to the classroom teacher, Thomas, and the principal, John, asking them to become involved. The principal reacted quickly and invited the parents to a meeting at the school the next day.<sup>xviii</sup> This prompt reaction, however, did not indicate that he agreed that further action should be taken as collaboration between the school and the group of parents. In an interview about the current situation concerning Jonathan, he outlined (without being asked) his committed view of the school's and the parents' primary tasks:

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We can't run around and play social workers all day long. We have a responsibility to teach them what's in the curriculum, and it's a school, not a day care institution. (...)  
But of course we will intervene in those things [conflicts, bullying]; we have a class



hour where Thomas [the classroom teacher] talks with them, the teachers talk with them, but we don't want to spend more time on something that isn't our primary task. It isn't our main task, and that's why I've pulled out, it's the parents' job. (...) We won't take over parental responsibility, that's their issue to deal with. (Transcript of interview with John, translated)

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The principal's claims 'We can't run around and play social workers all day long', 'it's a school, not a day care institution', and 'we don't want to spend more time on something that isn't our primary task' identify a conception of the school's task and responsibility as clearly and primarily *academic*. He seems to understand this primary task as something entirely *different* from solving relational problems among the pupils, which he suggests is the job of social workers and parents, thereby operationalising the Danish political strategy about the clear division of responsibilities between home and school (outlined above).

When the principal says '*It isn't our main task, and that's why I've pulled out, it's the parents' job.*'/'*We won't take over parental responsibility, that's their issue to deal with*', he both draws on the understanding of the correct division of responsibilities between home and school, and he implicates the prevailing Danish discourse of modern parents attempting to delegate their responsibilities to school.

In a later interview, the principal described how he presented his understanding of the situation at the initial meeting with the group of parents:

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(...) that night [at the parent meeting] I also said to Jonathan's father, who was sitting there with his new wife, they were saying how bad they had it, and I told him straight up that it was their own fault, and that it was they [Jonathan's divorced parents] who had caused this. I didn't see the others [the other boys in the group] as tyrants. (Transcript of interview with John, translated)

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In this presentation of the situation, the principal offers the interpretation that Jonathan's problems in relation to the other boys are a direct consequence of his parents' divorce five to six years previously. He locates the cause of his *current* problems at *school* in *past* relationships and family issues at *home*. From the interviews with the teacher and principal, it is clear that they

believed that Jonathan had been living in a stable home environment with harmonious family relationships for the past four years or so. Yet, in their representation of his current problems at school, their implied premise is that children, based on their experiences at home (even those five to six years before), develop a personality and a way of being that the child brings to school, in a more or less stable form. Here, the child's personality, expressed by his/her behaviour in the school context, may prove more or less problematic. The child's current interactions in and with the school, teachers and students are not regarded as shaping his/her behaviour or being in themselves.

The shared memory of Jonathan's parents' turbulent divorce six years previously seems to be highly performative in intra-action with the widely-held belief in the field of psychology that children's early attachments to their parents and their home circumstances in early childhood are fundamental to the patterns of their relationships and reactions later on in life. This intra-action produced an understanding of Jonathan's present problems with his peers as being about personal problems, and, contrary to Jonathan's father's claim, *not* a case of bullying.

### ***An applied perspective on bullying***

At the meeting, the principal presented the parents with a very explicit perspective on the situation. Furthermore, five of the six boys' parents were offered other and more attractive positions than parents of *bullies*. With the principal's interpretation, the boys were positioned as good, well-adjusted and entirely *normal* boys and their parents were positioned as successful parents of these good, well-adjusted and entirely normal boys; the parents were also positioned as people unjustly caught up in a situation that had little to do with them. The principal said:

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It's Jonathan who needs help; he is the one, in his case we need to improve his self-esteem and give him some insight, because he underwent a lot of damage in his childhood. The other five boys are completely normal (...). (Transcript of interview with John, translated)

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Jonathan should be offered help, John says, but not with his position in the group of boys. He needs help to solve his *actual* problems of low self-esteem and lack of self-understanding, which were caused by his tumultuous childhood home. When the principal presents the problem as

being about normal vs abnormal, he implicitly expresses his understanding of bullying as something that occurs between certain kinds of children: since the five boys are *completely normal* (and not *tyrants*, as expressed earlier), they cannot be *bullies*.

The principle's decision to reject the situation as one of bullying must also be understood as a consequence of the legal requirement (post 2009) for Danish schools to implement a plan of action in cases of bullying. Therefore, whether or not the situation among the boys is defined as bullying implies significantly different obligations and uses of resources for the school.

Dominant understandings of bullying as something that occurs between certain kinds of aggressive, domineering children who lack empathy and certain kinds of weak and meek children are also at play in this situation: as the presumed 'bullies' (the five boys) and the presumed 'victim' (Jonathan) do not fit the stereotypical and individualised perceptions of bullying held by the school (and by a large number of the parents), the understanding of Jonathan as the one with the problem is further strengthened. This apprehension and representation of the problem communicated by the school, which gains currency among the parents involved, intra-acts with another highly performative force in the apparatus: the discourse about modern parents being demanding and rejecting their parental responsibilities. When this discourse intra-acts with Jonathan's father's appeal to the other parents and his demand that the school intervene, a new, situated understanding is produced, in which Jonathan's parents are in fact trying to disclaim their responsibility for Jonathan's personal problems. By representing the current situation in this way, at least two possible options for dealing with the problem disappear: first, the possibility that the situation is something for which the school is at least partially responsible, and, second, the possibility of addressing 'Jonathan's problems' as a *joint* problem by the school, the group of boys and parents. Instead, a new sense of community is produced among the parents of the normal and well-adjusted boys.

Employing *messy situational maps* and the notions of *intra-action* and *apparatus* as analytical tools in this particular case allowed for an awareness and exploration of intra-actions between forces as diverse as the parent's concern about their boys' paths; the joint memory of the divorce of Jonathan's parents six years earlier; dominant understandings of bullying; the injunction (since 2009) for all Danish schools to have an anti-bullying strategy; the shared longing of the (five)

parents to be recognised as responsible and successful parents of normal, good boys; Marcus's mother's awareness that Marcus had become happier about school and better integrated in the group of boys since Jonathan has been excluded from the group; the principal's subtle application of the discourse of parents delegating their responsibilities; and the principal's attempt to operationalise the political strategy of a division of responsibilities between home and school.

With the understanding of a *situation* as a product and a (re)productive part of a given *apparatus*, this analysis establishes and maintains a perspective on the way parents' agency with regard to children's relational issues at school must be seen as *concurrently* part of a local situation *and* as part of a wider apparatus whose discursive, institutional, political, and other forces are entangled with feelings, understandings, practices, and other material-discursive forces at the local, situational level and which *together* produce particular meaningful categories and understandings, particular possibilities and contradictions, and particular subject positions and directions of intentions for the specific subjects here.

## **Conclusion**

Employing an emerging design that allows for an inquisitive, explorative focus on the subject matter at hand rather than on certain methodological techniques to be followed, the study presented in this article was conducted with the aim of gaining new insights into parental positions in children's bullying at school. By permitting the choices of the continuous production of data and the analytical methods employed to be informed by the on-going theoretical and empirical insights achieved, the research process resulted in the mapping of a widely ramified analytical ground, productive both of answers and of new questions to be posed.

A key finding of this study is that the current 'apparatus' of Danish home/school cooperation about bullying offers very poor conditions for a constructive and trusting relationship between school and parents. In this apparatus, parents initiate a conflict in relation to the school the minute they articulate their children's problems with their peers as *bullying*. It is in the parents' interest that the school recognises – and is thereby obliged to handle – the problem as bullying. It is in the interests of the school to clearly distinguish between what does and does not count as bullying, since this is essential to determining whether the problem is the responsibility of the school *or* the home. In this apparatus, parents who express dissatisfaction and frustration with the

way the school handles relational problems among its pupils are identified as overprotective parents, demanding consumer parents, or parents who try to shift the responsibility for their children's behaviour among their peers to the school.

The analysis demonstrated clear links between political, economic and discursive forces and the relational dynamics between subjects, which permits new understandings of the counter-productivity of the dialogue between parents and schools in cases of bullying. Parents' contributions and range of options to act on their children's problems of bullying at school must partly be understood as intra-linked with, conditioned, and made possible by dominant understandings of bullying and of the possible role of parents therein. Moreover, it must be understood as closely intra-linked with the local situation of which they are a part, the broader educational political forces, and the terms of the relations between the school and the home that these produce.

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## Notes

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<sup>ii</sup> Since August 2009, Danish *folkeskoler* (municipal primary and lower secondary schools) have been required to develop an anti-bullying strategy as part of a set of value guidelines.

<sup>iii</sup> The term 'curling parents' is a Danish concept that corresponds to the British 'lawnmower parents', which refers to parents who figuratively walk in front of their children and try to clear the way for them

<sup>iv</sup> When a child's problem at school may be defined as 'being bullied', Danish schools today are legally required to implement a plan of action.

<sup>v</sup> The *Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)* is a triennial international survey that aims to evaluate educational systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of fifteen-year-old students. (<http://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/>).

<sup>vi</sup> This kind of approach is in line with what Elisabeth St. Pierre and Alecia Y. Jackson (2014) calls a *post-coding analysis* in a *post-qualitative inquiry*. As such, the approach can be seen as a break with what Janesick (1994) defines as *methodolatry*, concerning the widespread privileging of methodological concerns over other considerations in qualitative research.

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<sup>vii</sup> For a critical discussion of this perspective, see Bansel et al. 2008; Schott 2014; Schott and Søndergaard 2014.

<sup>viii</sup> This understanding of bullying is expressed in large parts of the work of the research project 'eXbus', see Kofoed & Søndergaard (2009; 2013); Schott & Søndergaard (2014). Also see the work of Zabrodska et al. (2011) and Ringrose & Rawlings (2015), who employ ideas from Barad to examine bullying at universities and to consider the complex



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relationships of bullying in their analyses of gender and bullying at school, respectively. For alternative perspectives on the phenomenon of bullying, see Jacobson (2010), Walton (2011), and Ryan & Morgan (2011).

<sup>ix</sup> The original analysis is part of a peer-reviewed PhD thesis (author 2012).

<sup>x</sup> (<http://www.folkeskolen.dk/~Documents/41/55841.pdf>.)

<sup>xi</sup> From The National Association of Councils (Kommunernes Landsforening) and The Department of Education (Undervisningsministeriet) (2003): *Preparation of the distribution of tasks and responsibilities between school, parents and the surrounding society*: [http://www.kl.dk/ImageVault/Images/id\\_32807/scope\\_0/ImageVaultHandler.aspx](http://www.kl.dk/ImageVault/Images/id_32807/scope_0/ImageVaultHandler.aspx)

<sup>xii</sup> For an interesting perspective on the political representation and construction of problems, See Bacchi (2009).

<sup>xiii</sup> In 2005, the new law on 'Strengthening of parental responsibilities' (LF 108:) was passed (see <https://www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=103366>). This law made it possible for local authorities to impose so called 'parental charges' on parents, which obligate parents to carry out certain actions related to their children, and introduce the concept of 'parent programmes', proposed to help parents to be better parents.

<sup>xiv</sup> In Danish, this is termed 'ressourcesvage forældre', meaning parents poor in resources.

<sup>xv</sup> [http://www.stm.dk/multimedia/Debatopl\\_g\\_folkeskole.pdf](http://www.stm.dk/multimedia/Debatopl_g_folkeskole.pdf)

<sup>xvi</sup> The concept of 'family classes' came to Denmark in 2005. They were inspired by similar classes in the UK and have the same objective of improving the pupil's social behaviour through closer cooperation with his/her parents. Family classes typically last three months and parents have the opportunity to participate in the classes one to three times a week.

<sup>xvii</sup> <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/ft/20081BB00183>

<sup>xviii</sup> I did not attend this meeting but a later meeting between the parents.