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Responding to Interactive Troubles – Implications for School Culture

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Abstract

Responding to interactive troubles in schools can create processes of exclusion and marginalization. Certain basic assumptions can become knitted into school culture in ways that give rise to specific exclusionary practices. However, it does not have to be this way. Inclusionary ways of responding to interactive troubles can also be produced, given a school culture that nurtures relational ways of engagement. This article presents such relational practices and argues thoroughly for their use.

Keywords
interactive troubles, exclusion, inclusion, suspension, expulsion, becoming somebody, reproduction theory

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Responding to interactive troubles – implications for school culture

Interactive troubles in schools involve many people; students, teachers, principals, parents and counsellors, and can have devastating effects in terms of broken relationships, marginalization and exclusion (Lund, 2017). They require a major use of resources, economically, mentally, socially and relationally. Sometimes it seems impossible for teachers to curb the challenges they meet in classrooms. Students are often frustrated about being misunderstood or caught up in deficit positions. Parents are devastated about the descriptions of their children as problems. And principals struggle to support teachers in severe interactive troubles, while at the same time pushing for mediation and reconciliation between parties.

We intend in this article to show how all this is related to school culture and also to point to a need for a change in school culture in regards to responding to interactive troubles. Achieving such change is not easy but can be done. Actually, nobody needs to be caught up in interactive troubles in schools and categorized by them. When school cultures are inclusive and purposeful there are ways of dealing with interactive troubles that can lead to better outcomes, better futures and better social worlds.

Becoming somebody in school

Students of school age are intent on the identity task of becoming somebody (Wexler, 1992; Smyth & Hattam, 2004; & Winslade & Williams, 2012). They are learning more than academic knowledge and skills. They are also developing social skills and becoming citizens in a society. The school is thus central for children's and young people's social and psychological development and vital for their mental health. Therefore, it is important for a school environment to be inclusive, appreciative and safe (Rasmussen, Pedersen, &

Due, 2015) in order to produce a society that features similar values.

Interactive troubles

During a school day, interactive troubles might include conflicts, bullying, hurts, misunderstandings and other relational or communicational disputes. The term is derived from Smyth & Hattam (2004), who explain that such troubles occur when young people are prevented from fully participating in the school curriculum, because of their failure to understand the cues of the teacher, while teachers often seem unable to make sense of students' talk. Students are often reprimanded, individually held responsible and perhaps expelled or otherwise punished. The aim is not a completely conflict-free school environment, although reducing the number of conflicts and their negative effects may be desirable. The aim is to respond to interactive troubles in ways that foster learning, care, mutual understanding and restoration of relationships, so that exclusion, stigmatization and marginalization do not result (Lund, 2017). To develop inclusive practices schools must analyze their *cultures*, policies and practices and identify barriers to learning and participation (Booth & Ainscow, 2000).

School cultures and interactive troubles

When responding to conflict and problem behavior, school professionals engage in conversations and actions founded on basic assumptions and dominating discourses. Which assumptions and discourses are at play and how school professionals respond – what actions, practices, language and thinking they use – is important to subsequent events, to how relationships unfold, and, in the end, to the broader school culture itself.

Giroux (1991) argued that some conversations and practices make students and

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their parents voiceless in particular settings by not allowing them to speak. Roman (1996), Fine (1994) and Winslade and Williams (2012) argued that some students silence themselves out of fear, hopelessness or alienation. The data collected by Lund (2017) suggest that practices in dealing with interactive troubles in schools often silence and eventually exclude students and families.

Smyth and Hattam (2004) argue that in many schools,

Behavior, attendance and progress were invariably construed as the individual responsibility of the students. Deviations invariably invoked retribution that resulted in predictable consequences, which were always couched officially in terms of failure on the part of the student to take personal responsibility (p. 168).

Smyth & Hattam (2004) found in their research on early school leaving three different school cultures with significant implications for inclusion and exclusion as well as for the becoming somebody of students; the aggressive, the passive and the active school culture. In schools with aggressive school culture they found the highest rate of drop-outs, also seen in schools with a passive culture. Both cultures evoked alienation, exclusion and stigmatization, however in different ways. Only the active school culture gave rise to inclusionary ways of responding to interactive troubles and, therefore, to some extent prevented early school leaving. Table 1 presents the three school cultures that Smyth and Hattam found (2004, pp. 164-165).

Table 1. The Cultural Geography of the School around Early School Leaving

Dimension	Aggressive	Passive	Active
School Climate	Fear, Silence, Resentment Some students speak back Treated like children	Benign attitudes Habitual actions Struggling to come to grips with changing nature of youth Some students lives are written off Culture of dependence Treated indifferently	Student voice Agency and culture of dependence
Inclusion/exclusion	"Trouble makers" removed	"Ease out" those who don´t fit	Those who traditionally fit the least are most welcome!
Curriculum construction	Hierarchically determined Streaming undermines self-image	An intention to deal with the relevance of student´s lives, but this is not translated into the curriculum	Negotiable around student interests and lives Connected to students´ lives Respect for popular culture A socially critical dimension
Students lives/emotions	No space for dealing with students emotions	Acknowledges student emotions, but deals with them immaturely	Students are listened to Atmosphere of trust
Behavior management	Policies and guidelines adhered to and enforced Compliance demanded	Attempts to operate equitably, but schools get caught in contradiction of wanting to operate differently, but not having the underlying philosophy, self-fulfilling prophecy	Behavior management generally regarded as a curriculum issue Student participation in setting the framework
Flexibility	Compliance demanded	Gestures towards flexibility, but interpreted by students as inconsistency and lack of understanding	Respectful of student commitment and need for flexible timetabling
Pedagogy	Condescending way of treating students Over-reactive and paranoid teachers	Uninteresting classroom practices and boring curriculum Lots of mis(management) of learning processes	Enlarges cultural map for many students Students treated like adults Negotiation of content and assessment

Pastoral Care	No way of acknowledging harassment, sexism, racism, classism	Pastoral care but of a deficit kind Inadequate time, skills, structure and commitment	Actively connects with student´s lives Acknowledges importance of re-entry and alternatives

It is our conviction that it is possible to transform school cultures to enable students to become somebody with dignity. Doing so means strengthening relational practices in order to foster listening, invite enunciation, express curiosity, use appreciative language and take on the ethical responsibility of helping every student to become somebody. Every event and every conversation in school contains potential for students to become somebody and it is the schools´ finest task to give place for such potential, help bring it forth, name it and celebrate it.

Exclusionary ways of responding to interactive troubles

Tetler, Hedegaard-Sørensen, Emtoft, and Ulvseth (2012) and Graham (2008) explain that for decades, when it comes to difficulties around inclusion, the explanatory model has been individualistic in its focus. In particular, problem-, individual- and deficit- thinking leads to practices and communication with negative implications, effects and impacts on relationships and student becoming, in the process producing exclusionary outcomes (Lund, 2017; Graham, 2008).

A thorough examination of the ways that schools responded to interactive troubles shows how an exclusionary spiral evolves around six steps (Lund, 2017). The first one is that school professionals point out the student to be the problem. Step two is to lay out the problem story to the parents and gather further evidence. The third step is to reject, mute and problematize the family members, if they try to raise their voice and participate with their perspectives. Step four is to make the parents responsible for solving the problem and to do so at home (make the student behave well). The fifth step is to position the family as unwilling to collaborate, if they protest about

the lack of dialogue and collaboration around what the school can do to help the student. Step six is when the school gives the family no other choice than to go find another school. Lund (2017) concludes, that:

1. Responding to interactive troubles from deficit-, problem- and individual- thinking produces exclusionary processes.
2. Parents and students not yet "at-risk" can become marginalized.
3. These processes are happening in school, however invisible to most people.
4. It does not have to be like this, since other practices with proven merits in educational settings, are available.

The processes of responding to interactive troubles not only result in exclusion from the school, but also into the *privatization of responsibility* into the family with significant consequences for the family's wellbeing. These things happen due to *the particular types of interactions* based on and reproducing *the specific kind of thinking*, namely *individual-, problem- and deficit thinking* (Graham, 2008). Thus, we claim there is a strong need to develop restorative cultures where responses to interactive troubles are inclusionary.

The moral purpose of education

The concept of designing school culture brings to mind questions about the (moral) purpose of education. Such questions are contestable and widely debated internationally (Barber, Mourshed & Chijioke, 2010; Biesta, 2014; Fullan, 2003; Zipin, Fataar & Brennan, 2015). Schools must produce positive self-images in order for students to thrive and become independent, skilled, and responsible citizens (Tetler, 2011). If children are struggling with being stigmatized, marginalized or excluded, schools are failing to produce such positive self-images. From this viewpoint,

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stigmatization, marginalization and exclusion threaten schools' fulfillment of their moral purpose. Thus, we advocate a serious call for inclusive ways of responding to interactive troubles.

Deficit thinking and practices

Gergen (1991) explains the pervasive and problematic nature of deficit thinking. He identifies some psychological terms commonly used in describing the self: low self-esteem, authoritarian, externally controlled, depressed, stressed, identity crisis, anxious, antisocial personality, seasonal affective disorder, self-alienated, post-traumatic stress disorder. Gergen explains that these terms, "… are all terms of mental deficit. They discredit the individual, drawing attention to problems, shortcomings, or incapacities" (p. 13). The emphasis on identifying deficits in the individual has in many contexts become the default response. White (1989) argued that listening to people with profound respect involves taking them seriously, rather than interpreting them in terms of pathology. This means, "… *consistently working from the assumption that the person is not the problem; the problem is the problem*" (p. 6).

Yet, deficit discourse in schools has been growing more prevalent and "… *is always reductionistic. It totalizes persons or groups on a narrow range of experience …*" (Winslade & Williams, 2012, p. 17). They continue,

> *The problem of assigning deficits to people lies more in the side effects that are created … A principal side effect lies in the impact on the individual student's story of themselves. Especially when a deficit description has the authority of a teacher or principal behind it, or even more powerfully, the authority of a doctor or psychologist, it is very hard for a young person to deny* (p. 17).

The psycho-medical paradigm has come to dominate the educational field and has made popular the "within child deficit-model" (Skidmore, 2004, p. 33).

Disapproval as a pedagogical tool is also problematic. It is used far more often than appreciation, despite research that shows it does not have positive effects on student behavior (Morrison & D'Incau, 2000). In fact, Skiba and Peterson (2000) found a causal link between disapproval and increased aggressive and violent student behavior. By contrast, when schools met students with positive expectation, fewer students were sent to the principal´s office, antisocial behavior decreased, fewer students vandalized or behaved aggressively, and fewer students truanted, took drugs or used alcohol (Metzler, Biglan, Rusby & Sprague, 2001).

It is common practice to categorize students, especially those that challenge the boundaries of the school (Nielsen, 2003). The assumption is that when test results show what is wrong with the individual student, school professionals will automatically know how to organize the teaching in a suitable way. Thus, Nielsen argues, the school tries to compensate for deficits in the student, instead of challenging and developing the teaching or the school culture. Thomas & Loxley (2001) suggest that, "The school's need for order is transformed to an emotional need in the child" (p. 52). Deficit thinking thus becomes an overall explanatory model for a range of school problems.

This categorizing practice in itself is counterproductive to inclusion. Furthermore, because resources are often only provided when a student is assigned a diagnosis, diagnosing has become a key for schools to unlock resources. School professionals and families are encouraged to get the child diagnosed in order to gain access to resources. Such thinking implicitly intensifies categorization and segregation (Thomas & Loxley, 2001).

One target group for such categorization is what Smyth and Hattam call "early school leavers", often known as "dropouts". Typical research representations of dropping out effectively demonize young people and their non-completion of schooling (Fine, 1990), and create "a shaved and quite partial image" (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 4). Categorizing and stigmatizing individual young people, their lifestyles and their families as problematic

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deflects attention away from how school culture may have become unbearable for such young people and effectively forces them to leave. The discourse makes individual deficits visible and school culture invisible. The same happens with the marginalization of students in schools. Even when it does not lead to dropping-out, it can lead to misbehavior, poor thriving, poor learning outcomes, isolation and sadness.

Stigmatizing families

Whole families can also be described in deficit terms. When an individual student is found to be in deficit, his or her family may be described as dysfunctional, demanding and unwilling to cooperate (Haslebo & Lund, 2014; Knudsen, 2008a, 2008b, 2010; Madsen, 2008). Parents may be assigned the responsibility to, "solve the problem and do it at home". However, if the problem to be solved happens at school, it is by definition then a school problem. The exporting of the problem from the school to the home only serves to exempt the school from responsibility to take action. Such exporting also seals off schools from listening to parents who are easily just assumed to be "bad" parents.

Another debate regards school-family collaboration, where one discourse analysis argues that school-family relations are pre-disposed to fail (Knudsen, 2008a, 2008b, 2010). Five dominant discourses around school-family collaboration were identified by Knudsen, but none invited the parents into the relationship as equal and influential partners. Furthermore, none of the available discourses invited school professionals into listening responsively to parents´ accounts.

For the families experiencing them, exclusionary practices might have far-reaching implications. The doubt created by being blamed is not beneficial to the relationship between parents and children. Questions such as the following may arise for parents: "Are we blind to something?" "Have we neglected some signs?" "Have we let down our child in some way?" "Are we such a horrible family?"

Profound mistrust can develop towards school professionals concerning their skills, their will and intentions, and their status in society. Failure to establish an equal and dialogic conversation about helping students risks parents deciding that school-parent collaboration is unpleasant and pointless. Parent-school collaboration in dealing with interactive troubles will be difficult and what needs to be dealt with collaboratively will not be addressed. Teachers miss out on collective learning possibilities and lose sight of the perspectives of students. Teachers might decide that they have little power to solve interactive troubles. Bullying and negative interactions among students may continue, making teaching and school life difficult. Teacher empowerment and agency are at risk as well.

Beyond reproduction theory

New Danish research has shown that a substantial part of marginalized youth is brought up in families with no indicators of social marginalization. The traditional understanding that social marginalization is reproduced from one generation to the next does not appear to apply for these students (Benjaminsen et al., 2015). This research points toward the production of marginalization outside of families, such as in schools. Benjaminsen et al. argue that research needs to take a closer look at such processes, but do not say much about what they might be or where to look.

Our claim is that schools *produce* at-risk positions for students that were not marginalized in advance. It implies a need to go beyond reproduction theory to understand at-risk youth, since reproduction theory cannot explain the social marginalization of middle class youth through interactive troubles. It is more promising to look into exclusionary practices and the underlying assumptions that lead to the production and reproduction of exclusion and social marginalization in schools. We, therefore, advocate shifting towards the

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idea of reproduction of practices, rather than of types of people.

If social marginalization is produced in interactions, it must also be possible to interrupt its production. Given the right cultural context, young people might be able to break a negative social pattern (Phil, 2014; Ejrnæs, 2011; Jæger, 2003). In fact, it is possible to point to alternatives. If school professionals make use of a different way of thinking, other actions and choices become intelligible. We might turn instead to ways of thinking that produce positions, relationships and interactions in schools that are inclusionary. If we do so, students can become somebody worthy of respect, influence and contribution, even in situations of interactive troubles.

Thomas (2012) states that staff are key to enabling students to participate and feel like they belong, and to a high quality learning experience (Gibbs, 2010). The introduction of an intervention designed to improve the student experience can bring with it an implicit criticism of existing practices, which in turn can put staff on the defensive, and render them disinclined to engage with new initiatives. Thomas (2012) argues that working with retention and preventing dropping out requires working with staff capacity for involving students and nurturing *a culture* of belonging. School professionals are crucial to students feeling they belong, but Thomas´s research also shows that "staff need recognition, support and development, and reward to encourage and enable them to engage students and nurture their sense of belonging" (p. 77). This suggests that new approaches and interventions should be introduced sensitively, recognizing the professionalism of staff and the time involved, providing support and development, and offering reward for their efforts. Drawing on the wider learning and teaching literature such as Gibbs (2010) and D´Andrea and Gosling (2005), Thomas (2012) concludes that staff engagement is an important element of student engagement, belonging, retention and success, and one that needs further examination.

Responding to interactive troubles in inclusionary ways

School professionals can respond to interactive troubles in ways that offer students and parents positions with dignity, voice, and agency, and that invite them into forms of relating in which students can *become somebody*. Such ways of responding to interactive troubles imply an advanced professionalism, which has been in development for several decades in various educational settings around the world. In the following sections we shall briefly present a couple of ways.

Restorative Practices

Inclusionary ways of responding to interactive troubles in school are commonly referred to as restorative or relational practices (Drewery & Winslade, 2005; Kecskemeti 2011; Winslade & Williams, 2012). These approaches have developed to deal with bullying and conflict in order to establish an inclusionary learning environment for all students, without resorting to a punitive and marginalizing approach (Mirsky & Korr, 2014). Instead, they address problems, rather than blame. There is compelling research support for the efficacy of restorative practices (Drewery & Winslade, 2005; McGarrigle, 2005; Kecskemeti, 2011), as well as other relationship-focused approaches such as narrative mediation and undercover anti-bullying teams (Winslade & Williams, 2012; Williams, 2010). A third and fourth branch to mention here are CosmoKidz (Haavimb, 2015) and strength-based pedagogy and education (Lund & Haslebo, 2015). Restorative practices is a umbrella description for specific practices that make it possible for school professionals and students to effectively deal with interactive troubles in ways that strengthen relationships, enhance relational and communication skills and give hope for the future.

These approaches sprung from various inspirational sources and developed in various countries at a similar time. One source is restorative justice (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005; Zehr, 2002, 2004, 2005) that specifically aims to

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puncture the school-to-prison pipeline so that fewer young people are lost to criminality and a life on the edge of or outside of community. Restorative justice, as it emerged in Australia and New Zealand (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1999; Shaw; 2007), was developed with inspiration from both Maori and Aboriginal cultures. Restorative justice spread within a few years to many parts of the world and to many different areas from social work, education, crime prevention and so on (Drewery & Winslade, 2005). Jansen and Matla (2011) argue that restorative practice is a relational approach to school life, grounded in beliefs about equality, dignity and the potential of all people. The principles are:

- Restoration, not retribution, punishment, or consequences
- Problems exist primarily in relationships, not in individuals
- Responsibility to the victims, not bolstering the authorities
- Include more voices rather than isolate the individual
        (Restorative practices team, 2003, p. 4)

Furthermore, restorative practices are conducted with the purpose of schools taking responsibility for the process of students becoming somebody, regardless of the role they take in interactions (Renn, n.d.). Restorative practices are examples of ways to deal with interactive troubles that do not stigmatize, marginalize or exclude, but instead foster belonging, peaceful co-existence, becoming and inclusion. These approaches are learnable, doable, and feasible. They do produce a certain culture and work from within it. To this end, relational and restorative practices hold promise for very different and far better futures for students, parents and school professionals.

Creating a Culture of belonging

The school culture sets up standards or values and social instruments to achieve them, moving and shaping identities and the interactional resources used in their accomplishment. Wexler (1992) shows how

"good kids" get detention, but "burn outs" and "scum" are processed, defined and recycled within the punishment structure. Likewise, "elites" and "stars" are created in the corridors of schools. The types of selves produced are not random, but set by the central image of the school and the organizational devices used to achieve its image. Through stratification, a binary division between those students who will become winners and those who will be losers, are made.

In these ways school culture operates to create social divisions through constructing different outcomes for different students. Some students are selected out in advance for marginalization on the basis of, for example, social class or race. However, for others marginalization is produced as a result of interactive troubles that are handled in particular ways. School culture often instructs teachers to determine the origin of problems in the nature of the child. In this way it produces problematic outcomes from schooling. If we are to change this school culture, it is necessary to change the assumptions on which these practices rely. We have sketched out above some of the practices that might start to produce such culture change. There are no doubt many more that will be added. What they hold in common are assumptions that are based not so much on deficit thinking as on producing students who are becoming somebody

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