When school-family relations matter – discomfort and struggle among children, young people and their parents

Karen Ida Dannesboe
Danish School of Education
Aarhus University, DK

Niels Kryger
Danish School of Education
Aarhus University, DK

Charlotte Palludan[†]
Danish School of Education
Aarhus University, DK

Ethnographic studies offer insight into parents' involvement in and management of children's and young people's school lives in a Danish context. In light of the growing demand for parental involvement in school, the article explores the emotional work that families' interactions with the school imply and their attempts to avoid unwanted categorisation or stigmatisation. At the core of the article are three cases drawn from a larger study of home-school relations in Denmark. The three cases present examples of the emotional work involved when children and young people are categorised by the school as 'students with inappropriate behaviour'. Drawing on Erwin Goffman's concepts of frontstage, backstage and impression management, the analysis emphasises how these families' management of their children's school lives is dominated by time and effort spent dealing with feelings of anxiety and inadequacy. Furthermore, the study shows how parents and children struggle to gain recognition and avoid the school's categorisation of them.

Keywords: school-home relations, students' and parents' perspectives, emotional work, frontstage and backstage, stigma.

Introduction

In Denmark, there is a long tradition of involving parents in their children's school; in many ways, the current concepts and practices characteristic of the relationship between school and family are a continuation of what has been known for decades as home-school cooperation. In 1974, a new clause was added to the Education Act, requiring public schools (in Danish: *Folkeskole*[1]) to cooperate with all parents (de Coninck-Smith, 1990; Nørgaard, 1977). All subsequent amendments to school legislation have contained formulations stating that the remit of

schools must be carried out *in cooperation* with parents. Over the years, this has resulted in various notions of how such cooperation should be realised. These notions are surprisingly similar from school to school, regardless of the ages of the students involved (Dannesboe et al., 2012). Among the standard elements are annual or biannual 'parent-teacher conferences' where parents and teachers – and sometimes students – talk about an individual student, as well as one or two annual meetings for all parents in a class. In addition, there are information letters, electronic communication via a so-called 'parent-intranet', student plans and a variety of everyday interactions and social events.

In a Danish context, home-school cooperation, as a widely accepted and relatively standardised phenomenon, has achieved a status of what we have chosen to call a 'cultural given'. Nevertheless, there have been numerous political campaigns, programmes and educational initiatives during the past 30-40 years aimed at strengthening home-school cooperation and increasing parental involvement in the Danish

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Karen Ida Dannesboe, e-mail: kida@edu.au.dk

[†] Sadly, Charlotte Palludan passed away after a short period of illness during the writing process.
[1] Comprehensive municipal primary and lower secondary schools comprising of one year of pre-school class (Year 0) and nine years of primary and lower secondary education (Years 1-9), as well as an optional Year 10.

Folkeskole. The goal is to involve all parents and the political discourse prescribes that school-home cooperation should take differences in families' backgrounds into account. The argument seems to be that all parents can learn to be involved; it is a matter of teaching them how to become involved (Akselvoll, 2016). Akselvoll argues that the way schools frame the role of parents, expecting them to play an active part in their child's schooling, draws on existing ideals and norms of parenthood. Studies show how parents' roles are understood in terms of ideals of intensive parenting. Intensive parenting is often characterised as a child-centred parenting style, where the role as parent is seen as pivotal for children's development (e.g., Forsberg, 2009; Furedi, 2002, 2014; Hays, 1996; Lee et al., 2014). Lee et al. argue that this tendency represents a "parenting culture" that can be summarized to mean the more or less "formalized rules and codes of conduct that have emerged over recent years which reflect this deterministic view of parents and define expectations about how a parent should raise their child" (Lee et al., 2014, p. 9-10). In a similar way, the Danish state's expectations regarding parental involvement reflect the belief that what parents do is crucial for their children's development and learning (Akselvoll, 2016; Dannesboe et al., 2018; Krab et al., 2015; Kryger, 2015). In other words, parents are increasingly expected to actively engage in their children's school lives; correspondingly, it becomes more and more likely that this engagement can be judged as problematic.

To explore parents' and children's engagement in and experiences of school-family relations, we[2] conducted ethnographic studies (2009-2012) in different schools in Denmark. Our study shows that school-family relations are not only a matter of participating in formal school-family activities (such as parent-teacher meetings). We found that students' school lives and schools' demands for parental involvement profoundly affected families' everyday priorities and behaviour (Dannesboe et al., 2012). A striking theme across our empirical material was a sense of exhaustion and anxiety some parents and children experienced in relation to school-family relations - a preoccupation with how the school perceived them as a family (Dannesboe et al., 2012; Dannesboe, 2012). In this article, we further explore this theme and

focus on how parents and students engaged, prioritised and behaved when they experienced school-family relations as difficult.

An ethnographic approach allows the researcher to explore everyday practices in diverse social and cultural contexts (e.g. Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Madden, 2017). In our study, participant observations and interviews were a way to gain insight into children's, young people's and parents' movements, thoughts, feelings, experiences and hopes, as well as their everyday interactions with materiality and the setting of cultural norms.

We conducted three sub-studies that form the empirical foundation for the analysis we present below. The first field study lasted one year and took place in a middle-class area of Copenhagen. Participant observation and conversations were conducted in five families all of whom had a child in Year 0 at the local *Folkeskole*. During this period, Charlotte Palludan regularly visited the families, accompanied children and parents to and from school and participated when parents attended school meetings and social arrangements, as well as occasionally taking part in the children's lessons. The five mothers, in particular, confided in Charlotte regarding their thoughts and feelings. Louisa, one of these mothers, will be presented in this article. The second field study was conducted in a Year 6 class at a school located in a Copenhagen suburb. Students in this class, as well as their parents and teachers, were studied intermittently over a two–year period. Karen Ida Dannesboe employed methods of participant observation and ethnographic interviews. Qualitative interviews and photographic material were also compiled. Dennis and his mother Hanne from this study are presented in this article. The third study involved qualitative interviews conducted by Niels Kryger alongside Birte Ravn at three schools – two in the city of Copenhagen and one in a suburb of Copenhagen. A total of 62 young people in Year 9 were interviewed in groups of three or four. In addition, a number of interviews were conducted with teachers. From this study, we will introduce the 15-year-old girl Mia.

Across the three sub-studies, it was striking that some students and parents were categorised by the school as students or families who did not act properly. For these families - with children categorised by the school as students with problematic behaviour and often also academic difficulties – a preoccupation with the school and

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[2] The research group included Karen Ida Dannesboe, Niels Kryger, Charlotte Palludan and Birte Ravn.

its perception of them influenced their involvement in school. Dealing with school issues and handling relations with the school appeared to be hard and intensive work. For these students and parents, school almost seemed an invasion of their everyday home lives. Engaging in school was not only time consuming, but also produced feelings of anxiety and discomfort. In this paper, we address these issues by focusing on everyday micro-processes where students' behaviour is labelled as problematic and on how they and their parents are affected by such labelling processes. Through the presentation of three cases, we show how these micro-processes are entangled in family lives and have huge implications for parents and students. Furthermore, we address how children and young people tackle parents' and teachers' expectations of them as students and show how students are active co-creators of school-family-relations. The three cases we analyse have been selected because they represent families who struggle with the school's categorisation of them.

Research context

We are inspired by international research that, with critical sociological and anthropological approaches, studies the relationship between parental involvement and children's schooling. In a broad sense, this research illuminates the ways in which parents get involved and problematises their opportunities for doing so (Akselvoll, 2017; Bouakaz, 2007; Bæck, 2007; Crozier & Reay, 2005; David, 2003; de Carvalho, 2001; Kramvig, 2007; Lareau, 1989, 2003; Van Zanten, 2003, 2005; Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997; Vincent & Martin, 2002; Vincent, 2010, 2017). It also shows how gender, class and ethnicity affect conditions, preferences and priorities according to which parents bring up their children, contribute to their children's academic performance and relate to their children's schools. Not least, feminist perspectives on what is expected of parents and families are brought into play. Particularly drawing inspiration from Bourdieu, this strand of research has put cultural differences and social inequality on the agenda, as well as their reproduction in home-school relations. These studies draw attention to patterns of classification, differentiation and moral judgement that compel parents to invest inordinate amounts of time and energy to participation in home-school relations. In line with these studies, we focus on parents and

their opportunities to be involved in their children's schooling.

Children and young people are often neglected in studies of school-family relations. However, a number of existing studies, including our own, have suggested that students are active co-creators of school-family-relations (Dannesboe et al., 2012; Dannesboe, 2016, Edwards & David, 1997; Notko & Sevón, 2018.). In this article, we address how children and young people tackle parents' and teachers' expectations of them as students.

Analytical approach

To understand and analyse parents' and children's efforts in school and within the family, we are also inspired by Goffman's work on social interactions and frontstage/backstage. Goffman argues that, when frontstage, an individual makes 'an effort to give the appearance that his activity in the region maintains and embodies certain standards' (Goffman, 1959, p. 110), while backstage 'a painstaking fabrication of the sensible and strategic performance' (Goffman, 1959, p. 114) is taking place. We use these concepts to grasp how parents and children present themselves and act in certain ways in order to satisfy the school's expectations, but we also address how what constitutes front- and backstage may change depending on whose perspective we follow (parents' or students'). In this way, we also draw on Goffman's notion of impression management; that is, how people try to control the way they present themselves to others (ibid.). According to Goffman, being categorised with negative terms as different, as happens to several of the parents and children in our study, can become a stigma. Being stigmatised frequently affects interactions with others: the stigmatised individual can either try to pass as normal or to get his or her stigma recognised (cf. Goffman, 1963). In our analysis, we use the concept of stigma to understand how parents and children apply different strategies to deal with feelings of being regarded as different, a troublemaker or a not good enough parent or student by the school.

In the following, we analyse three cases that illustrate how the actors, through hard work and careful management of emotional challenges, become accustomed to and position themselves within these practices. We show how parents, children and young people engage and try to

manage discomfort and fear of stigmatisation through daily struggles and sensitive navigations of school-family relations.

Louisa´s discomfort

Coming to school with Louisa, mother to a 6-year–old boy, made it clear that she needed to discipline her body and play down her feelings by managing her face and voice in order to perform the role as a school mother with dignity and avoid difficulties. In other words, she performed 'impression management' (Goffman, 1959, p. 210-213). Louisa had a very strong feeling of discomfort regarding the school that could not be explained by her memories of her own experiences at school, which were mostly positive. Rather, this discomfort stemmed from a social and cultural distance that became very apparent in her encounter with the school as a parent. In the morning, when dropping off her son, Tyler, at school, she was taciturn and made no effort to engage with other parents or with the teachers. She seemed to recoil when the other parents and the teacher arrived or moved around in the classroom. Instead, she concentrated on her son and thereby managed to smile. Louisa once told Charlotte, one of the researchers, that this performance was triggered by a feeling that the teacher avoided her and was not interested in her questions, wishes etc. Louisa felt that the teacher preferred the other parents and neglected her needs. This caused her discomfort and silenced her. However, the teacher recognised Louisa´s feelings. She once told us that the middle-class mothers, as she called them, took all her time in the mornings. Louisa felt uncomfortable at parents' meetings and social events because she did not feel she was able to have conversations with the other participants. She could normally downplay this discomfort when she was accompanied by her fiancé or met one of the other mothers, who was a friend of hers. However, one-to-one conversations with the teacher at parent-teacher conferences, which the parents were invited to three times during their child's first year in school, required extensive impression management. When Charlotte met her in the corridor before these conferences, Louisa was shaking, sweating and alert because she expected to be demeaned and to become angry. However, during the meeting itself, she seemed calm, listened with apparent interest to what the teacher had to say and contributed with a few comments.

Hochschild uses the concepts of 'surface acting' and 'deep acting' to describe emotional labour that is part of people's impression management (Hochschild, 2003). In the case with Louisa, she managed to change her outward appearance – 'surface acting' - i.e. she tried to control her feelings and pretended to be calm. But her performance was not an example of 'deep acting' - she was unable to display a genuine self-induced feeling of confidence in the school's judgement of what constitutes appropriate social manners and a good upbringing (Hochschild, 2003, p. 35). She had confidence in the school as an institution, but this confidence was not transformed into confidence in the specific school and its teachers. It became very clear when Charlotte accompanied Louisa home after the conversations. Louisa was angry because she felt patronised, misunderstood and silenced. This was the case, for instance, when the teacher questioned the way Louisa handled Tyler's way of communicating: the teacher explained that she thought Tyler often ordered Louisa about. She felt that Louisa should confront Tyler and order him to stop. Louisa told Charlotte that she had reasons to react in this 'disarming' way toward Tyler, but she never found the right time and place to tell the teacher. On another occasion, the teacher blamed Louisa for Tyler's difficulties with behaving appropriately' at school and told Louisa that she, as a teacher, knew all too well what went on in their home, thereby insinuating that Louisa's family was dysfunctional. When the teacher talked to Charlotte about Louisa, she often stressed that she was 'a young mother'. The teacher's categorisation of the mother was well-intentioned - she wanted to stress that she paid attention to a vulnerable parent. The teacher wanted to help; however, Louisa perceived this attention very differently, which might have to do with some of their initial meetings.

Analysis of the empirical material concerning this specific school-home relation revealed that, at the very beginning of the year, the teacher expressed doubts regarding Tyler's school readiness and, later on, as to whether he would be able to move up to Year 1 the following year. This meant that Louisa first had to decide whether she herself should remove Tyler from school and re-enrol him in pre-school, and, later, to consider whether she should transfer Tyler to another school. The threat of exclusion was powerful, keeping Louisa in a vulnerable position and reminding her of her place in the social and

cultural hierarchy. This threat was supposedly unintended and unconscious, but the teacher's conduct was nevertheless influential and made Louisa, who had turned 30 and had been a single mother for five years, feel very annoyed and misunderstood. However, she never insisted that the teacher should understand her situation in the way in which she saw it. Instead, she reacted by doing what she felt was right: She insisted on bringing up her (school) child in her own way, even though she knew that the teacher disagreed. She related to the school and managed its demands in an untraditional and oppositional way compared to many of the other parents. She did not participate in many social events at the school; she did not keep a close eye on the information regularly sent out by the school because it was distributed via the school's intranet and she had no computer; and she decided to start the summer holidays one week before the official holidays. In other words, she did not perform the expected emotional labour: confidence in the school's judgement (Dannesboe et al., 2012). At school, she gave the impression, at least superficially, that she accepted and understood this judgement, avoiding dialogue or conflict. At home, meanwhile, it was obvious that she felt simultaneously angry and powerless, and it was a painful process for her to be a school-mother due to her feeling of being seen as the wrong kind of mother. Her problems with or resistance towards 'shaping an appropriate (inner) feeling' and her lack of 'feeling for the game' (Bourdieu 1990: 64) became visible in her bodily performance and her practices. For this, she was punished by being categorised as 'the young mother' with the inadequate son.

Dennis and his mother Hanne's anxieties

As was the case with Louisa, many of Dennis's and his mother Hanne's experiences with school and school-family relations were characterised by discomfort. Dennis was around 12 years old when Karen Ida, one of the researchers, first met him. He had some very good friends at school, but found 'school stuff' difficult. At school, he was often scolded for causing trouble, fidgeting and not listening properly. Dennis's behaviour at school, as well as his slow academic progress, was not only addressed in formal meetings, such as parent-teacher conferences, but was also communicated through newsletters sent to the whole class or phone calls from the teachers. In

many ways, Dennis's school life was a source of anxiety and daily struggle for the family. Dennis's mother, in particular, spent time and resources managing Dennis's school life, her own feelings and Dennis's expressions of how he felt about school.

Dealing with schoolwork, particularly homework assignments, was hard work and often exhausting for both Dennis and his mother. Dennis did not like doing homework. He explained to the researchers that he 'felt like giving up' on schoolwork as he found it difficult. However, he also explained that he 'had to do his homework' because his mum insisted. Reminding Dennis to do his homework and taking active part in homework assignments to make sure he did them was described by Hanne, Dennis's mother, as a daily struggle. However, being involved in Dennis's homework practices also produced a kind of shared, comfortable school space at home (see also Dannesboe 2012). Sitting on the sofa doing homework together, often while talking about other school matters, was something Dennis enjoyed. As he told us, he enjoyed 'not keeping things to himself'. Dennis's mother also explained how she could sense if something was wrong and would insist they talk about it. She explained that the most important thing for her was to have a 'happy child', but she was well aware that Dennis did not always feel that way about school. As she explained:

> The most important thing, I would say, is that my boy is happy. That is, that he is happy in a way where he feels like going to school, even though he thinks it is difficult. He sometimes feels it makes him sad, because he finds it difficult. (Hanne, Dennis's mother).

As such, Hanne's hope for a happy child who enjoys school is accompanied by a fear of what might happen in the future. As Massumi (2002) suggests, the fear of the potential affects our actions. And the fear of what the 'sometimes unhappy boy' may become in the future affects the parents' attitudes. In the case of Dennis and his mother, Hanne's experiences with Dennis's school and his situation produced anxiety. She was worried about his future, realising that she would soon no longer be able to help him with his homework.

Managing stigma

Furthermore, Dennis's mother was anxious about how he was perceived and categorised at school. She felt that Dennis was categorised as a

´black sheep' in his school class and blamed for anything that happened at school. If someone had been noisy, disrupted a lesson or got into trouble, Dennis was often involved - or at least the teachers thought so. Sometimes her anxiety felt like a heavy burden; for instance, when she received the monthly newsletters from the teachers. In these newsletters, the teachers often described how the school class had behaved, and sometimes Dennis and his friends were mentioned (albeit not by name) as a group of troublemakers disrupting lessons or creating other problems. Dennis's mother described her reaction to the newsletters as follows:

> When there has been something with some of the boys, or some of the girls, or something like that. And then, well, sometimes I just say to myself 'well, it is not the boys this time'; well, then I can breathe again, right?

As in the case with Louisa, this case illustrates how parents feel obliged to (re)act when the school identifies their child as ill-mannered or as a troublemaker. It is striking how the mothers' actions show understanding and loyalty towards their child. Like Louisa, Hanne, Dennis's mother, also tried to be loyal to her son. If she sensed something had happened at school, if he was upset about struggling academically or being told off, she confronted him. She thought it was best if they could talk about it and decide whether she should contact the teachers. In her own words, she never went 'behind his back'. Her sensitive navigations regarding Dennis's school life guided her actions and her management of relations with the school.

As Goffman (1959) points out, people often try to give the impression that they are acting according to dominant norms when interacting with others 'frontstage' in formal situations. In the case of Dennis's mother, she skilfully tried to act as a loyal school parent at meetings with the school. At parent-teacher conferences, she carefully described how she supported Dennis's schoolwork at home and cared about his academic progress and academic difficulties. She did not explicitly express her disagreement with the teachers' interpretation of Dennis's behaviour, but, unlike Louisa, she did not remain silent about her own interpretations and views. She carefully tried to paint a more nuanced picture of Dennis's situation. She explained that, being dyslexic herself, Dennis might have some of the same problems. Given this circumstance, she appealed for more help for her son. Regarding Dennis's

behaviour, she recognised and tried to explain that it was difficult for Dennis to sit still when he found the schoolwork difficult. In a non-confrontational way and with a calm voice, she presented herself as an understanding and loyal school mother supporting the teachers, while skilfully trying to explain and perhaps even change the teachers' view of her son. Thus, she tried to avoid the stigma she felt on behalf of her son (cf. Goffman, 1963). While the teachers acknowledged her 'work' at home by expressing that they thought she did what she could, they did not take her wishes and suggestions into account. Performing as an involved mother supporting her son and the school, she did not express her own struggles or anxieties concerning Dennis's school life and his future education. In this way, she managed her discomfort and everyday struggles with the school in a similar way to Louisa, but she also made an active attempt to remove the stigma attached to her son.

Managing school life

In the school context, we observed how Dennis was often one of the students who demanded the teachers' attention. They often told him to sit still and participate, and when they asked him a question, he was often unable to answer correctly. Occasionally, he tried to tell the teachers that he did not understand the task they were working on, but they often lost patience with him while explaining schoolwork. In this sense, it was a struggle for Dennis to keep up with schoolwork and, as we mentioned above, he did not like to do homework either. When we talked to Dennis, he explained that he was always being told off (also for things that he did not do) and that his difficulties with 'school stuff' made him feel he could never be good enough. He did not manage to perform in a socially acceptable way frontstage (at school), but backstage (in the family), he told how he did his schoolwork with his mother. However, the struggle and work both Dennis and his mother did backstage was not visible at school and as such not recognised by the school - Dennis was still described as a troublemaker and a poor student.

Our study shows that what counts as front- and backstage is not static, but can change in the course of everyday life. In the case of Dennis, the school also served as backstage - a place where he tried to prepare himself for how he should act at home. This was due to his earlier experiences of how problems at school became problems at

home; for instance, when his mother got angry with him because the teachers had notified her of some incident at school that they thought Dennis had taken part in. To avoid conflicts about such matters at home, Dennis tried to keep such information out of his family life. Therefore, he would refrain from giving his mother a newsletter from the teacher if he and some of the other boys were mentioned. He explained that he did so to avoid a conflict at home about his school life. In this way, he skilfully chose what to share at home. Through this impression management, Dennis tried to maintain a picture of himself as a student, rather than a troublemaker. Whereas Dennis's mother tried to avoid Dennis becoming stigmatised at school, Dennis tried to avoid the negative consequences of being categorised and stigmatised as a troublemaker at school for his home life.

The case with Dennis not only illustrates how school-home relations can be difficult; it also shows how processes of stigmatisation takes place in school-home relations and that both parents and children have to carefully work to avoid or deal with stigma. Moreover, it shows that it is not only a matter of how parents and children perform at school and in meetings with teachers; it is also a matter of how school-home relations are entangled in family life and in relations between children and their parents.

Mia's struggle to control the story about 'who Mia is'

An important aspect in both the above cases is the families' efforts to deal with and avoid stigmatisation. This becomes even clearer in the third and final case. Mia is a Year 9 student and, like many young people, is preoccupied with establishing her individual autonomy and (relative) independence. Many of the young people in our study considered the so-called home-school cooperation a potential threat to their efforts to develop more independent and autonomous relations to the adult world, stating that interaction between teachers and parents often positioned them as more childish than they considered themselves.

In our interview with Mia, she expressed discomfort and uncertainty about the way her mother, Laura, and her teachers exchanged views on her and her current life. Mia describes the most recent parent-teacher conference[3], in which she

participated together with her mother and her class teacher and another teacher.

It's a little insecure. You are sitting there with your mum on one side and your teachers on the other talking about what you are like at school. It is as if a camera recorded everything I did at school and then my mum saw x-number of film clips. That is actually what the teachers do. They show a number of clips. But what kind of clips? They talk about how you are in school. (...) That does not necessarily mean you have done anything wrong. But, obviously, you are afraid that they will say something bad about you. So I just feel unsafe to sit there with three adults. (Mia, student)

This passage demonstrates that Mia feels uncomfortable because she is unsure what kind of 'film' her teachers have edited about 'who Mia is at school' to show the parent(s). According to Mia, her mother does not need to know everything. She wants to have her 'private and personal life' in school without being held accountable by her parents. Correspondingly, Mia wants to have her 'private and personal life´ at home with her parents without being held accountable by the teachers. As such, Mia does not want her parents to tell the teachers too much about what is going on at home either and she becomes angry with her mother when she tells the teachers about her and Mia's bickering:

My teachers do not need to know if I am fighting with my mother (...) they do not need to know all my problems, because it becomes too personal and private, and then you end up having nothing to hide. And that's not nice.

Mia told us that, after the meeting, she and her mother had another quarrel. Mia was not only angry, but also felt offended because her mother had told the teachers about who 'Mia is at home' (in the mother's view). Applying Goffman's concepts of frontstage and backstage, this home-school conference can be seen as a frontstage where Mia tries to conduct impression management. The family arena and school arena each constitute a backstage, and stories about what is going on in these arenas should be modelled and edited to place Mia in a positive light at the meeting (frontstage), so as to maintain an appropriate *face*. In the Impression management

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[3] We use the English term 'parent-teacher conference' even though the student participates because it is essentially a conversation between the adults about the student (in Danish it is called *'skole-hjem-samtale'*: school-home conversation)

with the home as backstage, the mother is a co-actor and the teachers are the audience. However, when the school arena is backstage, the teachers are co-actors and Mia's mother is the audience. The teachers' stories about 'who Mia is at school' potentially threaten Mia's efforts to exert impression management and to maintain an appropriate *face*. Correspondingly, the mother's stories about their bickering are a potential threat to Mia's efforts to maintain an appropriate face at the meeting with the teachers as audience. Mia's anger and frustration seem to demonstrate that it is hard for her to conduct impression management at the meeting, since both her mother and her teachers, in her view, are not only co-actors and audience, but also potential opponents to Mia, telling inappropriate stories from backstage to each other. However, for Mia there seems to be more at stake than maintaining face or not. As a 15-year-old, she is at a stage where it is an urgent matter to develop a new story about 'who she is'. No longer a child but a young person. As such, negotiations about 'who she is' and who 'she is going to be' are important, both in her internal and her external negotiations – not least with the adults who are closest to her.

She describes both her mother and her female class teacher as important 'close adults', stating that there are many similarities in her relationships with the two of them, which, in both cases, are full of emotions, ambiguities and ambivalences. This is probably why she nevertheless finds it hard to imagine a complete lack of communication between school and home. Asked whether or not she thinks there should be cooperation between school and home, she replies:

> If it were up to us, we would not want our parents to know anything about the school, so you could do whatever you wanted.

We ask if she wants it to be like that:

> Of course, it could be great (pause) But no (...) there is no one to correct you. Because you are only 15 years old. You make mistakes. You make bad decisions. Sometimes our parents perhaps get too much knowledge about our school - but it is also about what you do yourself.

While not totally rejecting the idea of dialogue between home and school, Mia wants some kind of control over the situation. Like Louisa, Dennis and his mother Hanne, she tries to avoid the stigma that is a potential outcome of home-school relations. However, because of the dynamic

between her mother and the female class teacher, it is difficult for Mia to fulfil her mission - maybe even more so than for the actors in the other cases. The teacher felt sorry for Mia's mother Laura because she had had a 'nervous breakdown' a year previously caused by – as the teacher put it in an interview with us – 'her damned hysterical teenager'. The teacher describes Laura as a 'very sweet mum' and a good 'parental resource' in home-school cooperation. The mother and the class teacher's mutual solidarity and common understanding of 'who Mia is' seem to provide an external identification that keeps Mia in the role of the troublesome teenager.

A lot of emotional power may be latent in the communicative triangle constituted by the phenomenon of school-home cooperation. Mia is in a sensitive and vulnerable situation. In the interaction between her teachers and parents, she tries to conduct impression management and control what she see as inappropriate stories about 'who Mia is'. She also appeals for recognition and presents positive stories about 'who she, Mia, is'. As mentioned, one of the ways in which she tries to control the conversation is to get angry with her mother. However, it seems to be a kind of double bind, because the more she gets angry, the more it seems to confirm her mother and her female teacher's shared understanding of 'who Mia is' - 'a damned hysterical teenager', as the teacher puts it. According to dominant understandings of (good) home-school cooperation, this case would probably appear to represent a positive example of parental involvement. The mother's and the class teacher's mutual recognition could be seen as an example of positive relations between home and school. However, what this case also demonstrates that is not visible in these official discourses is that there can be a lot at stake for the students. The discourses are particularly lacking in sensitivity regarding young people's efforts to shape a relative autonomy.

Concluding remarks and discussion – sensitive navigations and concerned management of school

Our analyses of the three cases illustrate the way in which school-family relations may produce anxiety and frustration. The fear of being categorised as inappropriate in relation to cultural norms of school and school-home cooperation and the fear of being stigmatised are at stake. Even

though the teachers and parents we studied all expressed good intentions in their work with students and their mutual cooperation, stigmatisation takes place, as we have seen with the 'young mother' (Louisa), 'the black sheep' (Dennis) and the 'hysterical teenager' (Mia). However, all parties try to influence how they are categorised as a student or parent. The cases show how they try to present other images of themselves than those produced by the school, but they also illustrate the amount of effort this requires and how they are not particularly successful in their attempts to circumvent or change the stigma they feel. As these efforts are not recognised, they are silenced. Not only because of the school system and the ways in which communication between school and family takes place, but also because it is important for parents and students to demonstrate confidence in the school, to be loyal and to act within the structural and cultural frame of school-family relations if they want recognition. The presented cases, as well as other observations and interviews the authors have conducted, demonstrate that what counts as front- and backstage is often blurred, ambiguous and shifting. In the cases of Dennis and Mia, school and family serve as front- and backstage for each other. These shifts and ambiguities are among the indicators that home-school relationships are characterised by complexity in everyday life. Especially for those potentially stigmatised, it requires a lot of emotional work to manoeuvre in this complex home-school relation.

We have chosen three cases that all point to the fact that school-family relations can be difficult and can create a sense of being inappropriate as a student or parent. The understanding of home-school relations as something that requires work and sometimes struggle is present in much of our empirical material. However, there are also parents and students in our studies that experience home-school relations as easy and unproblematic. Their experiences are certainly not because they regard home-school relations as unimportant, but because they feel that their participation is acknowledged.

Our ethnographic study of home-school relations in an everyday life perspective challenges dominant and official discourses of home-school cooperation, home-school partnership, parental involvement etc. It highlights dimensions and aspects that are not taken into consideration in these official agendas for involving parents in education. One dominant understanding and discourse is '*The more home-school cooperation the better*'. This understanding seems to be behind many of the current initiatives and programmes to involve parents in their child's education. Such involvement is presented as unequivocally positive. However, these programmes often do not take into account the kind of emotional work and careful impression management (managing self-presentation etc.) we have highlighted in our study. One important issue to take into consideration is the vulnerability and potential stigmatisation of parents that do not live up to the norms for being good parents. This vulnerability seems to have been reinforced by programmes for parental responsibility - programmes that not only hold parents accountable for how their son or daughter behaves at home, but also for their behaviour at school (Dannesboe, 2012). Another issue is that these dominant understandings and programmes seldom take into consideration that increased interaction between parents and teachers may be experienced by children and young people as a threat to their development of an independent and relatively autonomous identity. This threat is especially great when home-school 'cooperation' includes teachers' and parents' sharing of how children and young people live their 'private' lives - respectively at school and at home. This represents a potential infantilisation.

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