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Danish and US Schools:
Enforcing Moral Boundaries in Discretionary Practices and Citizen Encounters

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*** This is a first draft based on preliminary analysis of the data. Please do not quote ***

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Panel: Frontline Workers Policing the Borders Within
Abstract

Frontline workers within the state play a crucial role in the categorization of citizens, determining for example, whether or not people are eligible for specific services, or identifying people who should be sanctioned. Some of these categorizations are made on the basis of rigorous administrative procedures, weighing different types of information against specific rules and regulations. Other categorizations, however, are made ‘on the spot’, taking into consideration mainly frontline workers situational judgement and interaction with citizens. This means, that frontline workers cannot be seen as solely following or enforcing already existing legal categories and boundaries. They may also enforce already existing social boundaries, or construct new categories and new boundaries between citizens. Also, previous research (e.g. Maynard-Moody and Musheno, Harrits & Møller, Dubois) has demonstrated, how such boundaries may be based beyond political, legal or professional frameworks, in the perceptions, values and norms of the frontline worker herself. To understand the impact of boundaries in frontline encounters, we must therefore explore in depth, the ways in which such boundaries are constructed.

This paper explores how teachers in Danish and American schools construct moral boundaries between children and families. Drawing on theories on categorization (e.g. Yanow, Harrits & Møller) and moral boundaries (Lamont), a framework for comparing the content and format of moral boundaries is established, focusing in particular on how moral boundaries may overlap with or transgress existing social boundaries of e.g. class, race/ethnicity and gender, and how such boundaries may vary across different cultural contexts. Using this theoretical framework and drawing on 39 semi-structured interviews with teachers in Denmark and USA, I explore the extent to which moral boundaries are drawn in similar ways across national contexts. Finally, following the empirical analysis, the paper discusses the possible impact of moral boundary drawing in frontline encounters, for citizens as well as for the legitimacy of frontline workers and the state.
Introduction

Street-level bureaucrats and frontline workers have long been an important object of study within public administration, sociology and political science. In their daily work, nurses, social workers, teachers, doctors, cops, and prison guards (among many others) perform tasks crucial for the functioning of democracy and society. They do this within the limits of policies and state resources, at the same time as they “fill out”, bend, shape and sometimes transform the goals and intentions of these policies. Frontline workers thus become both policymakers and the embodiment of state authority, as they engage in daily citizen encounters (Lipsky 2010; Brodkin 2012). This has an impact, not only in the ways policies are implemented, but also in the ways citizens get to interact with and experience policies and the state (Soss 1999; Epp, Maynard-Moody, and Haider-Markel 2014; Stuart 2016).

Previous research has pointed out, how frontline workers in their discretionary practices sometimes follow rigorous administrative procedures, weighing different types of information against specific rules and regulations, whereas other times they make decisions ‘on the spot’, taking into consideration primarily their own situational, social and moral judgments (Dubois 2010; Harrits and Møller 2014; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). Further, this research shows that discretionary practices cannot be seen as only embedded within a legal, administrative or political context. They are also deeply embedded in the organizational context of state institutions (e.g. schools, prisons or hospitals), in the interactional context of citizen encounters, and in the social and cultural context of the communities (local, regional or national) in which institutions and interactions are situated.
In this paper, I explore nuances of frontline moral judgements and the ways in which these are embedded in the social and cultural contexts. Focusing on moral judgements as part of discretionary practices among Danish and American schoolteachers encountering second-grade students and their families, the empirical study zooms in on conflicts and problems regarding homework and behavioral norms in the classroom. Both are arguably ordinary and mundane features of schools, and of interactions and conversations between teachers, children and parents. Therefore, discussions of classroom norms and homework here serve as a lens, through which teacher discretions and moral judgments can be studied in depth. In the final parts of the paper, I will discuss how the study of moral judgements can contribute to our understanding of discretion, frontline work and street-level bureaucracies.

**Studying discretion and moral judgments**

In their book *Cops, Teachers, Counsellors. Stories from the Front Lines of Public Service*, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) present the idea of citizen agency as a narrative supplementing the existing, and dominating, narrative of state agency for understanding practices at the front lines of public service institutions. Whereas the state agency narrative understands frontline practices as rule-bound actions focused on law abidance, the citizen agency narrative highlights “the orientation of workers to concentrate on their judgements of who people are, their perceived identities and moral character, as the desire for cultural abidance” (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003, 4). Other studies (Dubois 2010; Dubois 2014; Møller 2016; Harrits and Møller 2014) have in similar ways demonstrated, how
practices at the frontline are informed by social identities of both frontline workers and citizens, as well by judgements of clients’ moral and social worth.

As pointed out by Maynard-Moody and Musheno, moral judgments informed by social identities point to an inherent tension of frontline work between the role and narratives of the state agent and the citizen agent (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003, 156–58). On one hand, the logic of street-level bureaucracies is to transform abstract policies into decisions, also taking into consideration the always individual and concrete circumstances of the situation and each citizen (Lipsky 2010). Given that this transformation, and the complexity of frontline practices and interactions seldom can be foreseen or regulated in detail by any set of rules or guidelines (think of a classroom filled with second-grade children), it is hardly surprising nor necessarily problematic that frontline workers use both professional, cultural and moral knowledge to “make it work” in their daily practices. Frontline workers “do what they can”, given the many demands and (lack of) resources they face (Brodkin 1997, 24), and given the fact that they oftentimes are left with no choice but to make a decision and choose a course of action.

However, frontline workers cannot escape the state authority that they inevitable administer and embody, when they meet citizens and make decisions. As explained by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, this authority does not only relate to decisions on the distribution of resources and sanctions, but also to the symbolic dimensions of knowing who we are as a society and as human beings. State categorizations and moral judgements thus carry a special weight, grounded as they are in the state’s “monopoly of symbolic violence” (Bourdieu 2014).
To explore the construction and functioning of moral judgements, the paper suggests a theoretical framework useful in studying the nuances of moral judgements and the link to social identities, and a methodological strategy for studying discretions and judgements. Exemplifying this theoretical and methodological framework, the paper then presents an empirical study of teacher discretion and moral judgments in Denmark and USA. The aim of the paper is, however, primarily to make a theoretical contribution to the literature on frontline work and the dilemmas of citizen agency and state authority, using the in-depth study of teacher discretion to suggest key concepts and mechanisms.

**Theorizing moral judgements**

Studying moral judgments and social identities as part of teacher discretion requires a theoretical framework capable of comparing the ways in which moral distinctions between what is considered morally legitimate is based (or not) on the social identities of citizen-clients, and the ways in which such moral distinctions are linked to discretionary practices and decisions. Also, the framework needs to be empirically flexible and open, to capture the ways in which both social and cultural norms as well as social identities is constantly renegotiated in frontline work.

The symbolic boundary approach (Lamont 2000; Lamont 1992; Lamont 2012; Lamont and Molnár 2002) provides useful framework here, as it allows the study of different forms of categories and categorizations, as well as of how these may or may not be related. Also, included in the symbolic boundary approach is an explicit focus on moral
boundaries as an independent form of boundary drawing focusing people’s moral character and worth. In general, symbolic boundaries are

[...] conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality (Lamont and Molnár 2002, 168).

Depending on the content of the distinctions, symbolic boundaries thus comes in many different forms and types. Socio-economic boundaries draw distinctions between people based on their resources, socio-economic background or employment, whereas cultural boundaries are made between people based on intelligence, education, taste and manners (Lamont 1992). Also, symbolic boundaries can be racial or ethnic (Lamont 2000), or more broadly focused on the (national) communities, drawing distinctions between the ones belonging and the ones not belonging within the borders of a geographic (and political) space (Lamont and Molnár 2002); or boundaries can be professional, distinguishing between experts and laymen (Lamont and Molnár 2002), or between scientifically recognized problems and non-recognized problems (Abbott 1988).

Finally, Lamont suggest moral boundaries as the drawing of boundaries based on moral character, on the moral values that people display (honesty, work ethic, caring for others), as well as their social worth or deservingness (Lamont 1992; Lamont 2000). At first sight, this specific conception of moral boundaries may be seen to underestimate the normative or moral dimension inherent in other types of boundary drawing and categorization (Yanow 2003; Lamont 2012; Harrits and Møller 2011), i.e. the ways in which there can be an inherent valuation and hierarchization within any symbolic
boundary, marking one category more valuable or normal than others, or making assumptions on normal and valuable characteristics within each category (stereotyping, prototyping). However, the conceptualization of moral boundaries as independent from other types of boundaries can also be seen as a way of facilitating the empirical study of moral boundary drawing as an analytical separate phenomenon. This makes it possible to study both the dynamics of moral boundary drawing and the construction of different moral categories and hierarchies, as well as studying the ways in which such moral boundaries are then linked (or not) to other types of boundaries. Here, Lamont tends to emphasize the independence of moral boundary drawing, whereas other sociological scholars such as e.g. Bourdieu (1984), suggest moral boundaries as linked to and reinforcing existing social and symbolic boundaries.

Lamont explicitly embeds both symbolic and moral boundary drawing within a broader social and cultural context. Symbolic boundaries will sometimes draw meaning from existing distributions of e.g. economic resources or cultural lifestyles, but Lamont also highlights – and demonstrates empirically – how symbolic boundary drawing may vary depending on national communities, arguing that symbolic boundaries do not only follow individual experiences but also broader “cultural models” (Lamont 1992, 187–88). Also, one caveat is necessary in relation to the metaphor of boundaries, as this may suggest that all symbolic distinctions are drawn as explicit divides between ‘us’ and ‘them’. This is not necessarily the case, however, and symbolic (and moral) boundaries may vary with regard to both visibility, durability and permeability (Lamont and Molnár 2002), and some
symbolic ‘boundaries’ may even be constructed more as gradual hierarchies than clear divides (Bourdieu 1984).

Finally, even though Lamont recognizes that political institutions, including frontline institutions such as schools, hospital and prisons, are important sites for identifications and symbolic boundary drawing, the implications of this are not discussed in any detail. Recognizing the inherent political nature of what goes on at the frontline, we can, instead, turn to theories Schneider and Ingram’s theory on the social construction of target groups. This theory suggests, among other things, that “the allocation of benefits and burdens to target groups by public policies depends on the extent of their political power as well as their positive of negative social construction” (Schneider, Ingram, and DeLeon 2014, loc 2394). In other words, different policy tools will be selected, depending on how each target group is constructed with regard to both power and deservedness. Moving from the level of policy design to the frontline of public institutions, this mechanism may prevail and may thus be an important part of the logic of moral judgements and interventions here.

This proposition suggests a link between frontline moral boundaries and interventions, giving certain citizens access to resources and help sometime beyond what can be expected, and regulating or sanctioning other citizens, perhaps following ‘the letter of the law’ (see also Tummers et al. 2015). Such differences may be linked directly to frontline workers’ judgements of deservingness or non-deservingness as suggested by Schneider and Ingram, but they may also be linked to other types of moral and symbolic boundaries drawn in the specific context.
Summing up the theoretical framework, some guidelines and questions for the study of moral judgements and discretion across different contexts can be made:

1. What moral boundaries are constructed at the frontline, i.e. what differences are drawn between citizen-clients based on moral character, values and moral judgments of worth?

2. Are moral boundaries drawn differently across different national communities and cultural models?

3. Is the nature of interventions (help, sanctions) linked to moral and/or symbolic boundaries?

4. Do moral boundaries follow other symbolic boundaries, or do they have their own logic?

**Data and methods**

Within the study of symbolic boundaries, many scholars have followed Lamont’s choice of semi-structured interviews as a way of accessing the discursive nature of boundary drawing (see also Lamont and Swidler 2014), and this is also the strategy followed here. However, Lamont’s method of explicitly asking interviewees to talk about people they feel close to, and people they distance themselves from, is not necessarily applicable when doing interviews on frontline (professional) work, as the making of such explicit boundaries may very well contradict the professional norms and identities of frontline workers.

Within the literature on citizen agency, the narrative method and storytelling has been employed as a way of studying frontline work and of accessing authentic and “thick” descriptions of moral judgments (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). However,
when using this method, it may be difficult to systematically address the specific link between social identities and moral judgments, since the interviewer has no control over the stories that interviewees choose to tell. Therefore, an “inversed” narrative approach is used here, presenting each interviewee with two hypothetical yet realistic and authentic stories about a family and child experiencing problems in school. Presenting such vignette stories in an interview setting mimics the ways in which frontline workers make judgements in their everyday practices, and it facilitates a conversation about how and why frontline workers interpret and reason in these situations (Jenkins et al. 2010; Barter and Renold 1999). Each story was constructed to present the following information:

- a possible problem related to the child’s academic performance
- a possible problem related to the child’s behavior in the classroom
- a description of how the family handles school work / homework
- a description of the family’s own interpretation of the problem
- a description of the social background of the family, using occupation of the parents as a proxy for social class background

A total of three stories were constructed, varying information on social background and the precise nature of problems. Each interviewee was given a story about an eight-year-old middle-class boy in second grade, with problems in math and a habit of reciting inappropriate jokes from stand-up comedy shows that he watches online with his father. The family interprets the situation as related to the fact that they have just moved to the community and the express concern that the boy has problems finding friends. Also, the
family tells that they have stopped doing math homework, because the boy gets very upset. Following this story, half of the interviewees was given a story about an eight-year-old upper-class boy in second grade and half of the interviewees was given a story about an eight-year-old lower class boy in second grade. Besides information about the social background, all other information in the vignettes was similar. The boy was described as displaying a drop in reading scores in the latest reading test. Also, he was described as a popular boy that often acts as a mediator during breaks, but also as a boy with a lot of ‘noise’ around him, oftentimes commenting on the work in class as ‘boring’. The parents interpret the situation as a problem with lack of challenges at his level, and they tell that they have stopped making him do his homework, because it causes conflict at home, so often he will be allowed to play the iPad instead (see appendix for full-length vignettes).

The design of the vignettes thus explicitly aims to give cues about both academic and possible behavior problems, which are deliberately described in an ambiguous manner, so as to facilitate interpretations of the severity of the problem by the interviewee. In other words, the problems were designed so that the interviewees could legitimately interpret them as not necessarily requiring an intervention, or the opposite. Also, cues were given about class background of the families, to facilitate the study of how class identities may relate to symbolic and moral boundary drawing and the interpretation of problems and interventions. At the same time, all stories were presented with boys’ names and names connoting white/Caucasian ethnicity. Thus, even though social identities are often constructed as complex intersections of class, gender and race, this study chooses to focus specifically on differences related to class.
The vignettes were first constructed for interviews in Denmark (see below for a discussion of case selection). To make sure that the vignettes were constructed as authentic as possible, a small observation pilot study was conducted in a Danish school, and each vignette was discussed with teachers before making a final version. After finishing the Danish study, similar vignettes were constructed for the American interviews. Small adjustments were made to make sure that the stories would be perceived as realistic and authentic in the American context, at the same time as the nature of the problems were kept as similar as possible. For example, a slight change of the description of behavior problems was made, due to the fact that children in American second-grade classes often have only one teacher. Also, the reference to a specific comedy show as a cue of inappropriateness of jokes in the Danish context was changed to a general reference to comedy shows and an explicit characterization of jokes as inappropriate. Further, slight changes were made in the description of the academic problems to accommodate the standard expectations for second grade in American schools, and slight changes were made in the description of parent employment and age, to match a realistic description of American families. These changes were made consulting with several American academic experts doing research on education and thus familiar with everyday practices in American schools.

After being presented with the vignettes, the interviewees were asked an open “think-aloud” question about the boy in the story and his problems, followed by questions on whether or not they would be concerned for the boy, and what they would do in a situation like this. This provided a rich material of interpretations and reasoning about the nature of the problems, situations and interventions. Also, to make sure that the stories
presented valid and authentic problems close to the everyday experiences of the interviewees, each interviewee was asked if she, in her own classroom, could meet boys like the ones presented in the stories. Most interviewees replied that they could, and many of them said that the stories made them think of specific students that they had met. The vignettes were presented mid-way in the semi-structured interview, which also contained questions on the everyday practices of the frontline worker, views on families and students, as well as the personal and professional background of the interviewee.

As already mentioned, interviews were collected in both Denmark and USA. This was done to facilitate a comparison of symbolic and moral boundary drawing in two different national contexts. Differences relate both to the political and administrative regulation of schools, to the employment conditions of teachers, and to national culture. In Denmark, some regulations exist with regard to the specific goals for each grade level, but these are seen as guidelines and they are not enforced as heavily as in the American context. Also, some testing in relation to these goals exist in the Danish context, but again not to the degree that it exists in USA. Further, Danish teacher typically teach only a few subject areas, and they teach in different classes, whereas American teachers at this grade-level teach most subject areas in one class. Danish teachers also have considerably more plan time compared to American teachers, and they are more or less free to choose their own curriculum. More broadly, the Danish school system is part of a universal welfare state and a system of free education including all levels, whereas education in America is free only until the high-school level. Finally, Danish society is highly egalitarian, both with respect to distribution of economic resources and values, whereas the USA may be
considered both more unequal and more competitive. However, both countries are characterized by high levels of individualism, and respect for civil liberties.

In Denmark, interviews were performed in four municipalities varying with respect to size and urbanity, and within each municipality, two communities/schools were chosen varying with respect to degree of social homogeneity of the student population. In USA, interviews were performed in a mid-Western state, in five different school-districts (in three different counties), varying in size and degree of urbanity. In one school-district, four communities/schools were chosen varying with respect to social homogeneity of the student population. In the other four districts, one community/school was chosen, also varying with respect to social homogeneity of the student populations. All schools were contacted via the school management, who then facilitated names of teachers willing to do interviews. Teachers were then contacted individually for details regarding the interview.

A total number of 39 interviews were collected (22 in Denmark and 17 in USA). Although inferences to any broader population should be made with caution, the selection process was designed to make sure that different types of schools and teachers were represented in the data. However, only 2 male teachers were interviewed in each context. This possibly reflect the gender distribution of teachers in the lower grades in both Denmark and USA, but it nevertheless may mean that inferences especially to male teachers will problematic. Further, inferences to the American context in general may be limited by the fact that data was only collected in one mid-Western State. With these limitations in mind, it should be remembered that the goal here is not to make empirical
inferences to a broader population, but rather to explore in-depth nuances in frontline practices and meaning making with the purpose of building theory further.

All interviews have been transcribed verbatim by student assistants following a detailed guide for transcriptions. Further, interviews have been coded in two rounds, using the same coding frames across the Danish and American interviews (Saldana 2013). The first round of coding focused on the content of discretion and frontline interpretation, whereas the second round of coding focused more specifically on the drawing of moral and symbolic boundaries and on the nature of interventions (see table 1 for coding frame).

Further, the analysis build on both across-interviewee comparisons of boundary drawing, and within-interviewee analyses of how moral and symbolic boundaries are made by each interviewee towards different citizens (i.e. different vignettes), making it possible to address the question regarding the link possible between social identity, moral boundary drawing and interventions.
## Table 1 Coding Frame

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content of discretion and interpretation</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>Discussion and interpretations of vignette information about homework.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior</td>
<td>Discussion and interpretation of vignette information about class-room behavior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Boundary drawing</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic boundaries (class)</td>
<td>The drawing of distinctions referring to social resources, education or lifestyles of parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral boundaries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>The drawing of boundaries based on moral characters, values or moral worth of parents and children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>The negative moral judgment of the child and family in relation to a moral boundary drawing, for example by referring to the behavior as problematic, ‘bad’ or something that needs to be changed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interventions</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help</td>
<td>Description of actions in response to the vignettes, focusing on giving the child extra attention or extra help, for example by changing the nature of the homework or by guiding him to establishing friendships in the class, thereby changing his behavior. Also, initiating a conversation with parents about the establishment of such positive interventions are coded here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanctions</td>
<td>Description of actions in response to the vignette, focusing on making the child change the behavior by either addressing the behavior as wrong or by establishing sanctions/negative consequences in the form of e.g. behavioral management schemes. Also, initiating a conversation with parents about the establishment of sanctions or about the behavior as wrong and something that “has to change” is coded here.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The content of moral boundaries in Danish and American schools

Overall, the data presents the drawing of (mostly negative) moral boundaries among almost all frontline workers. In Denmark, most interviewees (18 of 22) draw a negative moral boundary towards at least one child and family regarding at least one of the two problems presented in the vignettes (behavior in classroom and not doing homework), with a slight tendency towards more negative moral boundaries being drawn towards behavior in the classroom compared to problems with doing homework. Similarly, most American interviewees (14 of 17) draw negative moral boundaries towards at least one family and child in relation to at least one of the problems presented in the vignettes, and more moral boundaries are drawn relating to classroom behavior compared to homework routines.

Further, the content of the moral boundaries is very similar in the two countries. In Denmark, moral boundaries drawn when discussing homework are primarily based on distinctions between hard-working and not hard-working students, and between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ parents, i.e. parents able and willing to install the right form of parenting and discipline towards their children, compared to parents taking a ‘too loose’ and forgiving attitude.

I think Mads has found a home in this thing with mom and dad saying that they do not want to push him, and that everything is new. And that is not okay. I mean, even though you are starting some place new, you still need to learn, first how to behave […]. I also think, parents like that, teachers and pedagogues, saying “we are all different”, “he will come around”, “we don’t need to push them”. And of course, I am exaggerating a bit, because it’s not always like that. But making excuses, saying this and that is to blame, and we will get it solved, and will solve itself. Instead of saying: “we need to work on this”. And “there are some things that are not okay”. (DTD18, talking about middle-class vignette).
And we need to address that, both at home and in school. That he refuses to do things. That adults will stand up and tell him, that there is a thing called “must”. And it’s okay that school is boring. Not everything is a computer game, where everything is fun. Because when you learn, it’s okay that things are boring. Because you practice. And that can be quite boring […]. But he needs to do his homework, because when we say homework, it needs to be done. And homework requires control. Because when you say homework and it is not done, then you hold everybody for fools. I mean, it needs to be controlled. Because when it’s not done, then they [the children] need to be confronted and need to get going. Mike needs to understand that. (DTA04, talking about the lower-class vignette)

That thing about parents being too busy, and when we are together, we want to be cozy (“hygge”). And we don’t want any conflicts about reading or homework. And there, we need them to tighten up. And say, this is very important […]. And about homework, that’s … I mean they think it’s boring what goes on in school, but then the answer is “Well, it can’t always be cherries and cake, sometimes it needs to be rye bread [a Danish metaphor for hard work]”. You need to work on things to get further. (DTB10 talking about the upper-class vignette)

The moral boundaries drawn in the Danish case thus address both the behavior of the child, and the behavior of the parents, pointing to a group of parents who apparently are not capable or willing to parent in the ‘right’ way. Also, moral boundaries drawn with respect to work ethic is linked to learning and behaving in learning-appropriate ways, thus implicitly legitimating the moral judgments by way of making a professional judgment.

Among the American interviewees, the content of moral boundaries drawn with respect to homework are also based on work ethic:

As far as the homework, I mean, you can never … tell a parent how to parent […]. But … I would definitely say, you know, “I’m doing as much as I can to
help him here at school … and if you would support me at home, it would help his progress so much more.” He would see that I am pushing the importance of learning and doing your work, at school, but then if he goes home and that same importance isn’t pushed at home, then… you know […]. Yeah and I’m like “Guys you … it takes you twenty minutes. Twenty-five maybe”. One math sheet or they read a chapter of their book. So, it’s nothing! But, you know, they [the children] say “I have dance” and “I have basketball.” Or “I have football.” And… I’m like … I try to get them to do it in the car… “Read in the car. Read on the bus.” (UTC11 talking about the middle-class vignette).

Well… I have some concerns on their parenting (laughs). I’m just kidding. I mean, I think I would suggest that … I would suggest that his homework, if he doesn’t do his homework, he doesn’t get the iPad. That would be my first suggestion (UTA01 talking about the upper-class vignette).

Uhm, with the homework […] again he could think of that as boring, because he, the iPads. It’s so much more fun. And I’ve seen that a lot of times, I’ve seen, parents, you know, first thing they do is they give the iPad, and I’m like “why aren’t you letting them read?” , you know. Let them read, let them do their homework. You know, as I said, I only give reading homework, about twenty minutes. […] I only want the twenty minutes of reading, that’s gonna help them out most. And so, I’ve talk to parents about “you know, they just want to be on the iPad and” (laughs). So, I was like “well sometimes the iPad isn’t what they need.” And in so many ways, I try to tell them that “you’re the parent, you can tell them when they can be on the iPad and everything.” Again, that’s very sensitive subject, because again you don’t want to, you know, tell them they’re being bad parents, but, you know, you want them to tell them the importance of and education and make sure they’re doing that […] . (UTA02 talking about the lower-class vignette).

Again, work ethic is linked to learning, implicitly legitimating the drawing of moral boundaries within a professional framework. However, the link to parenting is made more implicitly here compared to the Danish case, with many frontline workers explicitly saying
that they do not want to comment on or judge choices of parents, which they then
nevertheless proceed by doing in the interview.

In contrast to these moral boundaries, there are also both Danish and
American interviewees who draw no or only positive moral boundaries when discussing
homework, emphasizing how the child and parents are “trying” but struggling with
homework, or how homework is actually not very important:

And my opinion on homework, I mean, I usually tell parents about
homework, that they [the children] should not start crying about homework.
Then it’s better to come and tell me that they have not done it. Because you
don’t need to struggle that much, and things like working for an hour and a
half just reading half a page, which could be read in fifteen minutes. Then
drop it. It’s not that important. (DTB07 talking about the middle-class
vignette).

I’m not a strong advocate for homework. Actually, I have parents saying to
me “Why do they not get more homework?”. But I need to add, that this is in
the lower grades. Later it might be necessary with homework. I do give some
homework, but not much, and I am of the opinion that if students work hard
here at school, really work on it and reach to the points we need to reach, then
I actually don’t care so much if they do a lot of homework. (DTA01 talking
about lower-class vignette)

I would probably you know, first I’d probably tell them to stop doing
homework with him, because really, if he’s a big fight to do it, it might just be
turning him off to math. And, there’s not really any proof that doing
homework really means he engages. In second grade, and most of the time.
And I certainly wouldn’t want them to spend … I would probably suggest
instead some sort of fun type of game that they could play with him that
would build some of these number cards up. Like some dice games or card
games, or something that’s really short and really fun that maybe he can do it
with a peer, but he could also do with them. And that would give him, you
know, even with technology now, we’ve got stuff that kids love to do. That’s
more practical than that. And so, I would probably tell ‘em “well you need to
lay off the homework.” And anything I’m gonna send him for homework, he
needs to be able to do it independently at school. So, if he’s giving a struggle
about it at home… And they, you know maybe there’s a disconnection between how they’re showing him, and how we’re doing it, I don’t know. So, I just assume that they don’t. (UTD14 talking about the middle-class vignette).

Here, boundaries are drawn emphasizing the children in the vignettes as hard-working but struggling, and the link between homework and work ethic, and between homework and learning is de-emphasized.

When talking about behavior in the classroom, the moral boundaries drawn by interviewees are a little different depending on the precise nature of the behavioral problems in the two different vignettes (middle-class vs. upper/lower-class), but in both cases boundaries are drawn both towards the behavior itself and towards the parenting seen as responsible for this behavior. In the middle-class vignette, both American and Danish interviewees draw boundaries towards the inappropriateness of the jokes that the boy tells in the classroom as well as towards the parents (the father) for being an inappropriate role model, watching “adult” comedy shows together with his child:

About the fact that he watches this comedy show with his father. I will not let that pass by […]. I will wonder about that. What is it that … why do they share that, I mean. I would, yes. And they you can hope that that is what it takes. That these are parents that will listen and think: “Wait, maybe he should go play soccer, and that comedy show maybe is for teenagers” (DTC12 talking about the middle-class vignette)

I am laughing because I have a son I seventh grade, and he is so mad at me because he does not get to watch that show. Where I have just told him “no way”. That is not for you. That is simply not for you. So, I think this is an interesting detail in the story. Because, I think, this is not for children that age. Absolutely. But it’s difficult, it’s an interesting problem. And sometimes, you may wonder a little. Be curious towards the parents, instead of judgmental, because that is quite easy […]. And I think this could be a topic for a parent
meeting in the class, letting the parents discuss it. What do we allow our children to watch? Because sometimes you think that all the other children get to … (DTC14 talking about the middle-class vignette).

Again, however, American teachers make a weaker link between behavior and parenting, suggesting another distinction what goes on at home and in the classroom. Thus, whereas they will not interfere with what goes on at home, they will indeed interfere with what goes on in the classroom:

The jokes, the inappropriate things that he’s doing […] I would think if dad is a teacher that… you would think he kind of, I mean middle school is a lot different than elementary school. But I would think that he, you know, being a teacher, uhm… would… I mean they both are, they both work in very high professional jobs. I mean career jobs, a nurse and a teacher, Respected jobs that I think they would… yeah. […] No, maybe he [the father] need to not watch the shows that he’s watching with the kids. (UTB09 talking about the middle-class vignette)

Things like that, so I would try to address the lack of social skills first … sometimes inappropriate jokes, uhm… I think that might be a conversation to have with the parents, as tough as that is. You’ve gotta set the boundary and make sure it’s not appropriate for school. If you watch that at home, that’s your choice but in a school setting that’s not appropriate. So, I would talk to the parents about that and make sure I was being respectful. And since the dad’s… his dad’s a teacher. His dad should understand that that’s not an appropriate way to behave at school. (UTC12 talking about middle-class vignette)

The drawing of moral boundaries based on the inappropriateness of child behavior and parenting, stands in contrast to interviewees not making these moral boundaries, but instead commenting only on the jokes and the “clown-role” taken by the boy, which most see as a
symptom of the child not having any friends, and perhaps even as something that will further isolate him in the class.

In the upper- and lower-class vignettes, moral boundaries are drawn in relation to the disturbing behavior, the comments about class being boring and the child’s role as a mediator. Whereas the disturbing behavior and comments are rejected, mostly as part of a bad work ethic (sometimes also linked to the homework), the role as mediator is described, making a distinction between good and bad leadership. Both these themes are also linked to parenting, discipline and the child being allowed to decide too much:

That about him not wanting to participate in the collective activities initiated by the teacher. That makes me think, maybe he is popular, but if he doesn’t want to be a part of that. Perhaps, somehow, he is a loner […]. I think it’s okay to have those leader instincts, that is quite all right. But you still need to give room for others. And it’s also okay, that you are not always the one taking down your elbows, but sometimes you need to try to. It’s a balance, I think (DTC13 talking about the upper-class vignette).

I think the ‘boring’ is a cover for something else. I don’t think that will pass -- I think he will do very much to keep his position in the class. I think he will do a lot to keep that “chief” role that … he has gotten. And perhaps the other children also have expectations. It can be difficult to be on that pedestal sometimes. If the other children expect him to make the football teams, and to solve those conflicts. Then it can be difficult to keep the façade, if you actually do not want that role. … Uhm, and then he says that he does not want to participate in the collective activities. He is, maybe he doesn’t want to, maybe he’s bored, but then it also becomes … his voice gets more power, when he is put on that pedestal. And he can drag somebody along with him. (DTA05, talking about the upper-class vignette)

He is loud. And he is a trendsetter in the class, so that means a lot, to get him in another direction than ‘boring’ and “I don’t wanna”. Because he can get many kids to say that. Destroy a lot […] And I would say this quite clearly to
these parents. One thing is now, but another thing is the future, and we know where these things can go. So, I would encourage that we change it now. (DTC17 talking about lower-class vignette)

A slight difference appears here compared to moral boundaries drawn in relation to homework and inappropriate jokes, where interviewees primarily group the parents based on moral character (good or bad parents). Here, in relation to disturbing behavior, moral judgment and groupings are extended to cover the child, focusing on him being a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ leader, as well as the potentially bad influence he has towards on the other children.

A similar tendency is found among American interviewees:

My first thought would be… you know, it can be good, if he can demonstrate that he’s a leader, but is he demonstrating that appropriately? You know is he dominating in a way that he’s showing leadership skills, or dominating in a way to kind of just have control of all the situations. As far as not wanting to participate in class because it’s boring? Uhm… that with the teachers simply being boring. So, I mean if this was a student in my classroom, it would be just me having a conversation with that student you know: “I know that, you know, this, you’re really, really good at this. But I still need you to be part of the class, it’s not a choice.” And… making sure that that student knows that (UTB10 talking about the upper-class vignette).

I rarely have a kid saying “This is boring.” And I … think again, that I create a good classroom environment, where if one of my students did say “This is boring.” I think one of my other… any of my other students might say “don’t say that.” […] There’d be that peer pressure to where I think … that eventually that student would kind of wanna fit in, and would wanna be part of that good classroom climate. But… with this type of behavior, I would definitely address it with the kid. There would have to be consequences and then eventually… hopefully. That behavior would kind of go away. It doesn’t always happen, but it also when you let a kid get away with saying things like this and refusing to participate, you’re sending a message to the rest of your students too that you don’t wanna send. Because, like it says here, he’s a very popular student, so when they see him say that, they think “Oooh… He’s a
cool kid.” […] And if that means… uhm… that the principle needs to get involved then so be it. […] (UTC12 talking about the lower-class vignette).

These moral boundaries towards ‘bad’ children and parents, are contrasted by only a few instances where no or positive moral boundaries are drawn, emphasizing the good leadership qualities of the child, or suggesting in a more descriptive manner that the characterization of the teaching as ‘boring’ maybe adequate.

In sum, I find no or only few variations across Denmark and USA with respect to the content of moral boundaries. In general, negative boundaries are drawn towards lack of work ethic and inappropriate behavior, and towards ‘bad’ parents, being to ‘loose’ and forgiving towards their children, as well as ‘bad’ students potentially disturbing the moral order of the classroom.

**Moral boundaries and interventions**

Not surprisingly, the drawing of moral boundaries seems quite closely linked to decisions and interventions made by frontline workers. Thus, the drawing of negative moral boundaries oftentimes is followed by sanctions, whereas positive or no boundaries are followed by the initiation of some type of help. Surely, this should not be exaggerated, given the fact that interventions in all cases are rather small and mundane. Examples are frontline workers calling parents or inviting them to a meeting, initiating a behavior management system, or facilitating help in the form of easier homework, homework cafes or friendship groups. But even if differences are small, there is a difference between calling parents to a meeting with the intention of finding out more about the problem, or figuring
out how to help the child better, and calling parents to a meeting with the intention of “drawing a line” or “telling directly” that their or their child’s behavior is unacceptable and “needs” to change.

Following these distinctions, negative moral boundaries both towards homework routines and classroom behavior are followed by frontline workers either making an explicit intervention by “telling” parents and/or the child to change behavior, or by initiating a behavior-management system. In comparison, where no or only positive boundaries are drawn, frontline workers tend to initiate extra help, trying to work out the problems identified.

However, in the Danish case, a few (3) interviewees draw positive boundaries followed by initiatives that can interpreted as more punitive, or at least as “help” that is not to be considered voluntary. These three cases are all cases with homework routines in the lower-class case, where frontline workers will suggest to the parents that then actively try to install more discipline with regard to doing homework. Also, in four cases, negative moral boundaries towards the middle- (1), upper- (2) or lower- (1) class vignette, is followed by the initiation of more help or no action at all. These cases are all related to class-room behavior, and mostly it has to do with trying to reinforce a more positive leadership role. In the American case, a few (2) interviewees draw negative moral boundaries towards homework routines or towards classroom behavior in the upper-class vignettes but follow this up by providing help. Also, in a few instances (3), negative moral boundaries towards classroom behavior in the middle-class case is followed by no action,
and, or negative moral boundaries are drawn towards class-room behavior in the upper-class (2) and lower-class (2) vignette, without suggesting sanctions.

As the number of cases is rather small here, interpretations of the patterning should be done with caution. However, there seems to be a tendency towards lower class families being sanctioned even when a positive moral boundary is drawn, and middle and upper-class families not being sanctioned, even if a negative boundary is drawn.

**Social identities as the basis of moral boundaries**

Moving on to the final question about the link between social class identities and moral boundary drawing, I find indications of the existence of such link in two different ways. In both countries, but more visibly in the Danish case, moral boundaries are sometimes linked explicitly to class-based symbolic boundaries and distinctions regarding economic and cultural resources in the families. For example, interviewees link disturbing behavior in the classroom and the negative leadership role to parent’s upper-class position and their busy life:

I think he has gotten it or taken it, perhaps he has taken it very naturally. And then, he has some parents who, uhm, the jobs they have are jobs where they are used to making decisions. And he is an only child. Maybe they work a lot, but maybe he is the center of attention, when they are together. He does not need to take anybody else into consideration. There are no siblings. And they possible … talk a lot, those parents. Work a lot. And are very … action oriented and powerful. And he takes that with him, because that is what he sees. (DTA05, talking about the upper-class vignette)

He says it’s boring, it’s just that, that excuse-word. There’s something else. You’re lazy and you don’t want to, or it’s too hard, or, you know, or it’s too
easy and you don’t, you don’t wanna. You just honestly don’t want to take the
time to do it […] They [the parents] seem like pretty busy, ‘cause, or, or
maybe not. Maybe they can clock out at five and be home, uhm… … seems
like he’s trying to get attention though, you know, just his behaviors are… It’s
good he’s a confident kid, but uhm, he’s trying to get something in class, that
he’s not getting… elsewhere. Any time someone state, you know, any loud
announcement to the class, I’m like “okay, you want my attention, you want
some to…” And especially that he is selective, if he is interested he will do it,
if not he won’t. (UTA05 talking about the upper-class vignette).

Also, problems with homework and classroom behavior is linked to lower-class parent’s
lack of resources:

Right away I am thinking that these are parents where you can say that they
don’t have the resources for, uhm, for example helping their children with
homework. And then it’s not the child that you need to get a hold of, but the
parents, and find out, concretely, do they have the chance of creating a small
‘home work room’. So, so, we always find something that kind of can be,
something positive for them to do […]. So, so, uhm, but I will also suggest
that it is important that they kind of find a way to get some time for homework
(DTA03 talking about the lower-class vignette).

I mean it’s almost like, I wouldn’t say his family is in crisis, but it’s definitely
a big change in their family. […] And it sounds like he has a lot of; he’s got
some behaviors going on… that might be a little difficult to curb because the
parents have uhm … are kind of taking his side. They told you that… they
describe the homework and activities at school as boring and stupid so they’re
not really… uhm… they don’t really have your back they’re kind of taking
Mike’s side. So, I’d be more concerned about this, just because it sounds like I
don’t have the relationship with the parents that I need (UC12 talking about
the lower-class vignette).

However, beyond the explicit link between symbolic and moral boundaries made by
teachers themselves, there is a patterning of moral boundaries across the different vignettes
queuing different social class backgrounds and identities. Sometimes, negative moral
boundaries are drawn towards the upper- or lower class vignette, when no boundary is
drawn towards the middle-class vignette, typically because the issues is not addressed, but
sometimes even when an explicit positive boundary is drawn in towards the middle-class
family. When discussing homework, five Danish interviewees draw negative moral
boundaries toward the upper- (3) and lower- (2) class vignette, even if they have not drawn
a negative moral boundary toward the middle-class vignette. When discussing classroom
behavior, a similar pattern is found, drawing negative boundaries towards the upper- (5)
and lower- (2) class vignettes at the same time as no or positive boundaries are drawn
towards the middle-class vignette, typically interpreting the middle-class story as a story
about a child struggling with self-esteem and getting friends. Also, a few interviewees draw
positive boundaries towards the upper- (1) and lower- class (3) when discussing homework,
even if no boundaries are drawn towards the middle-class vignette. Finally, two frontline
workers draw a negative moral boundary towards the middle-class vignette without
drawing a similar boundary towards the upper/lower class vignette.

All in all, 10 (of 22) frontline workers draws a negative boundary only
towards the upper/lower class when discussing at least one of the two problems, which can
be taken as an indication that there is a possible link between social identities and the
distribution of resources, and the drawing of moral boundaries. Also, it is worth noticing
how in the Danish case, moral boundaries are drawn somewhat harder and more often
towards the upper classes, whereas the lower classes are more often characterized as
struggling, especially when discussing homework.
Table 2: Boundaries drawn by Danish interviewees

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Also among the American interviewees, interesting patterns are found. When discussing homework, almost no negative moral boundaries (1) but several positive moral boundaries (5) are drawn towards the middle-class vignette. Further, negative moral boundaries are drawn towards the upper- (2) and lower-(3) class vignette, even when no or positive moral boundaries are drawn toward the middle-class vignette. Interestingly compared to the Danish interviewees, no positive moral boundaries are drawn towards the lower-class vignette.

When discussing classroom behavior, more negative moral boundaries are drawn towards the middle-class vignette compared to the Danish case, even by some frontline workers (5) not drawing negative moral boundaries towards the upper- (3) or lower- (2) class. This may be due to the fact that the inappropriate jokes are simply considered more serious in the American context, or because this is queued more strongly in the design of the vignette, which directly mentions jokes as inappropriate. Many frontline workers thus draw negative moral boundaries towards both the middle- and the upper- (4) and lower- (2) class vignette, and a few (2) draw boundaries only towards the lower-class vignette. All in all, 7 (of 17) teachers draw negative moral boundaries towards the upper- or lower-class vignettes but not the middle-class vignettes in relation to at least one of the themes. Also, fewer negative moral boundaries are drawn towards the upper-class vignettes in the American interviews, whereas more negative and fewer positive moral boundaries are drawn towards the lower-class vignettes.
Table 3: Boundaries drawn by American interviewees

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One striking example illustrating the difference in moral boundary drawing between classes is displayed by teacher UTA02. This teacher, when discussing the homework routines of
the lower-class family, emphasizes the need for homework, the link to work ethic, and a ‘no excuse’ argument coupled to the parents’ situation:

Mom is unemployed, dad is on disability due to work injuries, so there might be some of that, those problems. Again, I would never assert that that could be the problem, unless the parents brought that in, and brought that to my attention. Again, I just don’t feel like what’s going on at home is, is my business, until it’s brought to my attention. I might know about it. […] You know, he can’t do his homework because they have to take dad to physical therapy, you know, and all that stuff. So, okay I understand that, and I can be more lenient about the home work and everything. But you know, just have Mike read in the car… you know, there’s a perfect thing. He doesn’t need the iPad, let him read in the car… or in the waiting room, while you’re doing … That’s the way he can develop those skills and everything. And you say “yeah, read here and when we get home, you can have as much iPad time as you want, but during visits like that.” (UTA02 discussing the lower-class vignette)

However, when discussing the middle-class vignette (which is done before discussing the lower-class vignette), a quite different moral judgment is made:

As far as academics. Again, I would relate it to the parents [situation] and uhm, we would just try to maybe do… like reduced work at home instead. I don’t, I don’t give math homework, I just do the reading homework […] But if it was, we’ll just change around to reading, he’s not reading too well and everything. So uhm, we would try to, maybe just do a reduced one to begin with and have him “Okay, just read two pages tonight, that’s it. That’s all you have to do. You don’t have to read the whole book, just read two pages. Alright, next week we’re gonna read three, next week we have to do four.” And just develop it that way, so he is doing that. (UTA02 discussing the middle-class vignette).

In sum, social class identities do seem to have some impact on the drawing of moral boundaries, although the patterning of the data is slightly different across the two countries.
In Denmark, moral boundaries are drawn a little harder and more often towards the upper class is, whereas this tendency is reversed in the USA.

**Concluding discussion: Moral boundaries, discretionary practices and citizen encounters**

Frontline workers often find themselves in situations, where they have to make decisions without strong policy guidelines, or where discretionary room within these guidelines are quite wide. As pointed out in previous studies, frontline workers, often make such decisions based on moral judgments of citizen-clients. This, however, can result in tensions between the state authority of frontline workers, and the social and cultural norms guiding decisions, especially when these social and cultural norms are embedded in and tend to reinforce existing inequalities and biases. To understand these tensions more in-depth, this paper has suggested the symbolic boundary approach as a useful framework for studying frontline practices.

Making a theoretical distinction between moral and other types of symbolic boundaries, the symbolic boundary approach provides a theoretical and methodological tool, making it possible to make in-depth interpretations of the nature and content of moral judgments, as well as on the ways in which these are linked (or not) to both interventions and to the social identities of the citizen-clients. The empirical study suggested, that we should expect a strong link between moral judgments and interventions, even if the moral judgments are not directly linked to deservingness but center around e.g. work ethic or appropriateness of behavior. Also, we should expect such moral boundaries to be linked to
social identities, at least when these identities are based on social class background as in this study.

Furthermore, the moral boundaries seem to be very similar even across two national contexts with very different political systems and a very different organization of the frontline (i.e. the school system). Also, differences in national culture seem to result not in different moral judgments, but in differences in how social identities come to influence these judgments. Thus, in the Danish egalitarian culture, the upper class is met with more negative moral judgments and the lower class are met with more positive judgments focusing on their ‘struggling’, whereas this seems to be reversed in the American context.

Obviously, the impact moral judgments on homework and classroom behavior may seem mundane and not very significant. However, the concrete judgments made here is a lens for studying the mechanism of moral boundary drawing, interventions and social identities present at the frontline. Further empirical studies are needed, but we may assume that moral judgments are made regularly, in many different situations and related to many forms of behavior. This will most likely result in a more significant patterning, where some children and families are regularly met with moral boundaries, categorizing them as ‘bad’ parents or ‘bad’ students, and initiating sanctions rather than help.

Given what we know about the formation and negotiation of social identities, such external categorizations have strong impact on both the cultural and understanding of different groups, as well as on the identification of people themselves (Jenkins 2014, 204; see also Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Also, if moral boundaries are indeed linked to existing social inequalities, the impact of frontline moral judgments will function to
reinforce such inequalities. The empirical study here, suggest this to be case in relation to social class, whereas previous studies have suggested that this may also be linked to race and ethnicity (Gilliam 2009).

Understanding the tensions between moral judgements, social identities and state authority is thus important, both as a way of understanding the mechanisms of frontline work, but also for better understanding the possible function of frontline institutions in society. As suggested here, the symbolic boundary approach is a useful tool in this endeavor. Also, even though the study here suggests that moral judgements are based on existing social identities, this is not the case for all interviewees. Thus, one important question for future studies is to explore how and when frontline workers make moral judgments based on existing social identities such as race or social class, thus possibly reinforcing societal inequalities and biases, and when discretion and moral judgements evade such inequalities.

References


Jenkins, Nicholas, Michael John Bloor, Jan Fischer, Lee Berney, and Joanne Neale. 2010. “Putting It in Context: The Use of Vignettes in Qualitative Interviewing.” Qualitative


Appendix

Vignettes used in Danish interviews

Middle class

Imagine a boy in the second grade. You are his class teacher. His name is Mads, he is eight years, and he started in the class just five months ago, when his family moved to the town. The mother is 38 and pedagogue, and the father is 44 and teacher, and they both work at the local school. Mads is the mother’s only child, while the father has two children from a previous marriage.

Mads has had a fine start in the class. He is a funny boy, and he has gotten a lot of attention from the other boys by telling jokes, for example from “Klovn” (a Danish sitcom primarily for adults), that he watches together with his father. In the classroom this creates some disturbances, and some of your colleagues have mentioned to you that they have difficulties getting Mads to be quiet. Also, the gym teacher has told you about some episodes where Mads has acted out very strongly, because he has felt that he has been treated unfairly.

During the last month, the parents have told you that Mads as difficulties making really close friends in the class, and often he does not have anybody to play with during the afternoon or in the weekend. The mother tells that it has been difficult moving. For example, she has been separated from her mother and older sister, and the family has not yet made many friends in the area yet, just as Mads has not yet found any after school activities that really interests him.

While preparing for a regular meeting with the parents, you have talked to the math teacher. He tells that Mads is somewhat behind in math compared to the rest of the class. Mads lacks some basic skill: he can’t tell the time, and he is not quite sure about the numbers above 20. The parents have told the math teacher that they have stopped pressuring Mads to do his homework in math, because he often gets very upset. And due to the moving and Mads beginning in a new class, they have avoided putting too much pressure on him.

Upper class

Imagine a boy in the second grade. You are his class teacher. His name is Vitus, and he is eight years old. The mother is 40 and a MD, and the father is 43 and engineer. The mother works on a hospital nearby, and the father is employed in a private company.

Vitus is a popular boy in the class, and he often takes a rather dominating role both in class and in the breaks. During breaks it is often Vitus decides on the teams that will play football, just as he acts as a referee and solves conflict. In class, there is always a lot of disturbances around Vitus, and sometimes he will state, very loudly, that the activities started by the teachers are “boring” and that he doesn’t want to participate. But sometimes he will be a very active participant in class discussions.

Parents tell, that during the last six months they have had difficulties getting Vitus to do his homework. Even though the homework is not much (typically it will be reading fifteen minutes a day, and some small math assignments), they often end up in conflict. The parents have also told you that Vitus describes the homework and the activities in schools as boring, and often he ends up being allowed to play the computer. The parents think that Vitus lacks sufficient challenges, and they are considering putting Vitus in a private school with a higher academic level.

While preparing for a regular meeting with the parents, the Danish teacher has presented the results of the last reading test. The Danish teacher explains that the test confirms her suspicion, namely that Vitus’ level has dropped severely in the last six months, and that he actually has a substantially lower level of reading skills compared to the other children in the class.
Imagine a boy in the second grade. You are his class teacher. His name is Mike, and he is eight years old. The mother is 40 and a nursing assistant, and the father is 43 and a truck driver. The mother is temporarily unemployed, and the father is on sick leave with a back injury.

Mike is a popular boy in the class, and he often takes a rather dominating role both in class and in the breaks. During breaks it is often Mike who decides on the teams that will play football, just as he acts as a referee and solves conflict. In class, there is always a lot of disturbances around Mike, and sometimes he will state, very loudly, that the activities started by the teachers are “boring” and that he doesn’t want to participate. But sometimes he will be a very active participant in class discussions.

Parents tell, that during the last six months they have had difficulties getting Mike to do his homework. Even though the homework is not much (typically it will be reading fifteen minutes a day, and some small math assignments), they often end up in conflict. The parents have also told you that Mike describes the homework and the activities in schools as boring, and often he ends up being allowed to play the computer. The parents think that Mike lacks sufficient challenges.

While preparing for a regular meeting with the parents, the Danish teacher has presented the results of the last reading test. The Danish teacher explains that the test confirms her suspicion, namely that Mike’s level has dropped severely in the last six months, and that he actually has a substantially lower level of reading skills compared to the other children in the class.
Vignettes used in American interviews

Middle class

Imagine a boy in the second grade. His name is Jacob and he is 8 years old. He started in your class 3 months ago (in early November), at the same time as he moved here with his family. The mother is 32 years old and works as a nurse at the local hospital. The father is 35 and works as a teacher at a local middle school.

Jacob has had a fine start in the class. He is a funny boy, and he has gotten a lot of attention from the other boys by telling (sometimes inappropriate) jokes. Most of the jokes are from stand-up comedy shows that he watches online with his father. In the classroom this creates some disturbance, and some of the specialists have mentioned that they have difficulties getting Jacob to focus on what he is supposed to be doing.

During the last month, the parents have told you that Jacob has described having difficulties making friends in school, and often he does not have anybody to sit with during lunch or to play with during recess. The mother tells you that the family has moved to the community only a year ago. As a consequence, she has been separated from her own family (her mother and older sister), and the family has not yet made many friends in the community. Also, Jacob has not shown any interest in after school activities.

In relation to a routine parent/guardian/teacher/student conference, you have prepared to talk about how Jacob is somewhat behind in math compared to the rest of the class. Jacob lacks basic number concepts and he is struggling with one- and two-digit addition and subtraction. The parents have told you that they have stopped doing math homework together with Jacob, because he often gets very upset. Due to the moving and Jacob starting in a new class, they have wanted to avoid putting too much pressure on him.

Upper class

Imagine another boy in the second grade. His name is Ethan, and he is eight years old. His mother is 39 and she works as an oncologist at a nearby hospital. The father is 42 and works as a civil engineer at a private company in a nearby city. Ethan is an only child.

Ethan is a popular boy in school, and he often takes a rather dominant role both in class and in at lunch. At lunch, Ethan is the one who dominates conversation at the table, and he often acts as mediator in conflicts between the other children in the lunchroom and on the playground. In class, there is always a lot of motion around Ethan, and sometimes he will state, very loudly, that the activities started by the teachers are “boring” and that he refuses to participate. At other times, he will be a very active participant in class discussions and activities, which he has decided are not boring.

The parents have told you that during the last six months they have had difficulties getting Ethan to do his homework. Even though the homework load is not excessive, they often end up in discussions and conflict. The parents have also told you that Ethan describes the homework and activities in schools as boring and stupid. Typically, he ends up being allowed to play on the iPad instead of doing his homework. The parents think that Ethan lacks sufficient challenges, and they want the school to meet his needs.

While preparing for a routine parent/guardian/teacher/student conference, you have looked at Ethan’s most recent reading assessment. This confirms your suspicion that Ethan’s reading comprehension level has decreased in the last six months, and that he actually has a substantially lower level of reading compared to the other children in the class.
Lower class

Imagine another boy in your class. His name is Mike, and he is eight years old. His mother is 29 and is a certified nursing assistant (CNA), although she is currently unemployed. His father is 32 and has previously worked as an over the road truck driver, but right now he is on disability due to a work injury. Mike is an only child.

Mike is a popular boy in school, and he often takes a rather dominant role both in class and in at lunch. At lunch, Mike is the one who dominates conversation at the table, and he often acts as mediator in conflicts between the other children in the lunchroom and on the playground. In class, there is always a lot of motion around Mike, and sometimes he will state, very loudly, that the activities started by the teachers are “boring” and that he refuses to participate. At other times, he will be a very active participant in class discussions and activities, which he has decided are not boring.

The parents have told you that during the last six months they have had difficulties getting Mike to do his homework. Even though the homework load is not excessive, they often end up in discussions and conflict. The parents have also told you that Mike describes the homework and activities in schools as boring and stupid. Typically, he ends up being allowed to play on the iPad instead of doing his homework. The parents think that Mike lacks sufficient challenges, and they want the school to meet his needs.

While preparing for a routine parent/guardian/teacher/student conference, you have looked at Mike’s most recent reading assessment. This confirms your suspicion that Mike’s reading comprehension level has decreased in the last six months, and that he actually has a substantially lower level of reading compared to the other children in the class.