What Would We Do without Timing? Temporal Norms and Practices in Schools

Although temporal norms and practices are not part of the official curriculum of most formal educational institutions, they play a major role in the effort to make children develop collectively within a pre-determined schedule. Also, they serve to teach children a culturally age-appropriate perception of time. Drawing on Elias’ (1992) notion of social time, time is to be grasped as a social activity. If children do not learn how to time their behavior and regulate themselves in ways compatible with society’s temporal orientations, they will at some point according to Elias have difficulties with being perceived as adults. As implied here, timing involves relations of power.

This presentation highlights these socialization practices of institutional time in schools. Based on an ongoing ethnographic study in Danish public schools, the presentation will discuss empirical examples of how temporal norms and practices are interpreted, negotiated and customized for different purposes by teachers and students. Social norms related to timing and synchronicity are contested but stand out as common points of reference in what is, or is not considered to be the most sensible use of time, tempo, order, sequence and rhythm. Most children in the study, especially girls, perform time in ways that teachers favor, but some children are perceived as deviants. It is suggested that these daily practices reflect larger processes of selection and conformity in education related to culturally and historically specific perceptions of time. Conformity, however, does not exclude people’s attempts to gain temporal autonomy. Inspired by Flaherty’s (2011) work on temporal agency, it is possible to capture children’s creative ways of obtaining a desired temporal experience while they are actively producing and reproducing temporal norms.