



## Article

# The Right to Be a Subject of Your Own Life—A Study of Parent-Teacher Conferences in Danish Lower Secondary Education

Clara Ina Severin Steensen \* and Stine Helms

Centre for School and Learning, University College Absalon, Trekroner Forskerpark 4, 4000 Roskilde, Denmark; sthc@pha.dk

\* Correspondence: ciss@pha.dk; Tel.: +45-27171049

**Abstract:** Many recent legislative reforms concerning children have emphasized the importance of involving children and adolescents in accordance with the principles of Article 12 in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This article deals with the rights of youths to express their opinions, feelings, and views in parent-teacher conferences in lower secondary education in Denmark. Both international and Danish research on parent-teacher conferences has shown that students are often objectified and are not provided with real opportunities to participate with their own voices and perspectives. Based on the sociology of Hartmut Rosa, the article explores students' experiences of parent-teacher conferences as zones of alienation or spaces of resonance. In addition, we draw on Gert Biesta's concept of subjectification to analyze how the current organization of the conferences largely displaces students' opportunities to bring themselves into play as subjects of their own lives. The analysis is based on observations and interviews carried out in 2021 and 2022.

**Keywords:** parent-teacher conference; children's rights; Hartmut Rosa; Gert Biesta; participation



**Citation:** Steensen, Clara Ina Severin, and Stine Helms. 2024. The Right to Be a Subject of Your Own Life—A Study of Parent-Teacher Conferences in Danish Lower Secondary Education. *Social Sciences* 13: 66. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13010066>

Academic Editors: Hanne Warming and Sarah Alminde

Received: 1 November 2023

Revised: 9 January 2024

Accepted: 10 January 2024

Published: 22 January 2024



**Copyright:** © 2024 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

This article explores the role of students in lower secondary schools as participants in parent-teacher conferences within the context of the Danish education system. The central argument of the article is that a society that takes children's rights to freely express their own views on matters that concern their lives—cf. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child—must also create practices in school that ensure a real involvement of the students. Through empirical examples we seek to illustrate how parent-teacher conferences often lack opportunities for students to voice their views and perspectives. In the last section of the analyses, we however show an example of a parent-teacher conference with a greater inclusion of the students' perspectives. With the various examples the intention of this article is to give rise to reflections about the purpose of the parent-teacher conference in the light of children's rights to express themselves freely. Following this introduction, a brief account of the theoretical concepts and perspectives used in the analyses will be outlined. This is followed by an account of the article's methodological starting point. Sections 5–7 constitute the article's analyses, and Section 8 consists of discussion and final conclusions.

Under Danish law, the parent-teacher conferences are not obligatory, but they are often used as part of implementing §13 in the Danish Primary School Act where it is stated that: 'The students and parents, cf. §54, must be regularly informed about the views of the teachers and possibly the head of the school on the students' benefit from schooling' and furthermore 'As part of the teaching, there must be an ongoing evaluation of the students' benefit from this, including the student's acquisition of knowledge and skills in subjects and topics in relation to competence objectives and points of attention, cf. §10' ([Bekendtgørelse af lov om folkeskolen 2022](#)).

As stated in §13, in the Danish Primary School Act there is a strong focus on evaluating the individual student's benefit from the teaching, primarily based on academic criteria. In Denmark, a number of specific competence objectives have been set with associated knowledge and skill objectives, which students are expected to achieve at different grade levels ([Bekendtgørelse af lov om folkeskolen 2022](#), §10).

The parent-teacher conference is thus part of an evaluation culture with a focus on the individual student's academic development and level. However, this evaluation culture is far from only a Danish phenomenon and must be seen in the light of a growing market orientation in the education sector—especially in Western countries ([Ball 2003](#); [Biesta 2009](#); [Helms 2017, 2020](#); [Moos 2016](#); [Steensen 2023](#)), along with an increased emphasis on optimizing schools' and students' performance, which has resulted in a heightened demand for individual achievement.

In Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, it is pointed out that: 'Participating states shall ensure a child who is capable of formulating his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters concerning the child (...)''. If we, as a society and school system, aim to uphold a student's right to voice their opinions and be involved in decisions about their own life, it seems problematic that the Danish Primary School Act specifies that it is primarily the teachers, and possibly the school head, who convey information about the student's academic performance to both the student and parents. This practice may not actively encourage a dialogue where the student's perspectives are actively included in matters related to their schooling.

Both international research ([Förster 2016](#); [Kotthoff 2015](#); [Hofvendahl 2006](#); [Lendrum et al. 2015](#); [Tholander 2011](#)), and Danish studies on parent-teacher conferences ([Helms and Steensen 2023, 2024](#); [Helms 2017, 2020](#); [Knudsen 2010](#); [Kryger 2012](#); [Kryger and Ravn 2007](#)), have shown that students are not provided with real opportunities to participate with their own voices and perspectives. Internationally as well as in Denmark, increasing attention has been paid to the unequal distribution of speaking time between teachers and students in parent-teacher conferences, which is why several schools in both America ([Benson and Barnett 2005](#)) Sweden ([Pihlgren 2006](#)) and Denmark ([EMU 2017](#)) have tried to enhance students' active participation by allowing students to lead and take responsibility for these conferences. However, despite this effort, there is no clear indication that students' voices are heard and respected to a greater extent. A Swedish study points out that teachers in the so-called student-led conferences often continue to exert control by guiding students toward predetermined responses ([Tholander 2011](#)). In this way, an increased level of student involvement may not necessarily signify a greater inclusion of the students' own perspectives. Instead, it may indicate a trend where students are asked to assess their own responsibility for various issues, by which the students are held accountable for their own learning (*ibid.*).

When we wish to problematize the fact that neither in the Danish Primary School Act nor in practice much attention is given to the inclusion of the students' voices in the parent-teacher conferences, it is because the conferences deal with a significant part of the child's life—that is, the child's life in school. The child's rights to freely express its own perspectives and views in relation to its own life—cf. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child—must therefore also be emphasized in the parent-teacher conference. This argument is further supported by the fact that the stated purpose of the Danish public school is that: 'The public school must prepare students for participation, co-responsibility, rights and duties in a society with freedom and democratic governance. The school's function must therefore be characterized by freedom of spirit, equality and democracy' ([Bekendtgørelse af lov om folkeskolen 2022](#), §1). If the Danish school is to meet this purpose, the school's practices, including the parent-teacher conference, must also give the students the opportunity to experience that their perspectives are taken seriously and thus that the school is characterized by democratic practices, where the students are active participants in equal relations. In this context, it can be argued that, despite the fact Denmark and other Nordic countries are recognized as pioneers in safeguarding children's

human rights, there is, both in the legislation and in practice, conditions that seem to work against the students' opportunities to shape and express their own viewpoints as active participants in their own lives.

With this article, we aim to set the stage for a discussion of the obstacles that hinder students' rights and their genuine participation as valuable contributors. We seek to enhance the understanding of the concept of participation by emphasizing that not all forms of participation are inherently beneficial. The quality of participation depends on whether the student is provided with reasonable opportunities to participate actively in the conversation—not just as an object of external demands and expectations but as subjects in their own right. To understand students' opportunities for participation in the parent-teacher conferences, we draw on Hartmut Rosa's concepts of alienation and resonance in school, and seek to explore students' subjective experiences of participation in parent-teacher conferences as both zones of alienation and spaces of resonance (Rosa 2021; Helms and Steensen 2023). In addition, based on Gert Biesta's thinking, we will demonstrate how involving students in ways that primarily position them as objects of various external demands displaces participation as subjectification. Subjectification is understood as the opportunity for the student to use their freedom to bring their voice into play and find a personal interest in the agenda of the parent-teacher conference.

## 2. A Sociology of the Relationship with the World

Hartmut Rosa's sociological theory of resonance provides a valuable perspective on the dynamics of the issue of youths' possibilities to express their opinions, feelings, and views in parent-teacher conferences. When students experience alienation within the school system, where their voices are unheard and their experiences are marginalized, it intersects with their rights as articulated in Article 12. Conversely, creating resonant educational environments, where students feel heard and valued, aligns with the spirit of this international convention. Therefore, it is crucial to explore how Rosa's concepts can inform practices within parent-teacher conferences, ensuring that the rights of children to express themselves are upheld and respected.

Hartmut Rosa's sociological framework describes the subject's encounter with the world as either experiences of alienation or experiences of resonance. With alienation, Rosa refers to a world relationship where the social world appears indifferent or even hostile to the subject. When subjects experience the world as alienated, they perceive their own body, emotions, surroundings, and social interaction contexts as unresponsive or mute. The subjects find themselves in a state where they may have relationships, but these are perceived as indifferent. In contrast to alienation, there is the experience of resonance—understood as transformative and dialogic processes where the subjects engage with and immerse themselves in the world. When individuals, through their interactions with the world around them, experience the dual aspects of being influenced by others and influencing others in return, this dynamic is characterized as resonance. According to Rosa, a student's connection with the world is profoundly shaped by his or her experiences within the educational system. Interactions with teachers and fellow students play a pivotal role in determining whether a student perceives school as a resonant environment or, conversely, as a source of anxiety and a hostile realm of alienation.

It is crucial to emphasize that nurturing resonant experiences requires that a student's own voice is allowed to be expressed and heard, a quality that Rosa contends is challenging to attain in an educational system that prioritizes optimization and efficiency. In this context, resonance is not simply about echoing the teacher's voice but also about having the capacity to express resistance. In educational environments where efficiency and optimization are the sole focus, such resistance may not be tolerated, thus limiting students' opportunities to be heard and influence others (Rosa and Endres 2017, p. 56; Rosa 2021, pp. 284–85; Helms and Steensen 2023).

### 3. Education as Subjectification

Biesta's perspectives on subjectification and freedom provide an opportunity to examine the nature of participation or its absence in parent-teacher conferences. According to Biesta, subjectification within the education system is about granting the student the freedom to become themselves: 'It is . . . not about educational production of the subject—because in the language of production the subject is turned into a “thing-being-produced-by-interventions-from-the-outside—but about bringing the subject-ness of the child or young person “into play”, so to speak; helping the child or young person not to forget the possibility of their existence as a subject' (Biesta 2021, p. 47). Becoming a subject therefore involves creating an educational system where the child/young person is given the opportunity to connect with her- or himself as a subject, rather than as an object of others' expectations. (ibid., p. 51).

In our analyses, we employ Biesta's concept of subjectification to highlight how these conversations often involve objectifying the students, making it difficult for them to be included as subjects—including experiencing their own freedom. Experiencing one's own freedom is about having the opportunity to engage with, and respond to, what one encounters in the world. Subjectification is thus about the freedom to say 'yes' or 'no', to stay or choose to leave, to go with the flow or to resist it (ibid., p. 45). In accordance with the child's right to freely express their own views about matters that concern their life, cf. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, we find Biesta's concepts of subjectification and objectification suitable to illustrate how the communication between teachers and students during the parent-teacher conferences can both close and open a student's opportunity to express their own views and perspectives and thereby, as a student, to be able to enter into character as a subject whose voice is taken seriously in school.

In relation to the concept of subjectification, Biesta introduces the concepts of qualification and socialization, which, according to him, constitute two predominant purposes in the school and education system. Biesta does not deny the necessity of qualifying and socializing the individual in school but also emphasizes that a 'strong' qualification and socialization agenda can counteract the subjectification of the student (Biesta 2009, p. 40). In the analyses in the article, we specifically seek to illustrate how these agendas of qualification and socialization manifest themselves during parent-teacher conferences. As highlighted in the article's introduction, the parent-teacher conferences are part of an evaluation culture with a strong focus on the individual student's academic development and level, for which Biesta's concept of qualification becomes relevant to use in the analysis of the conferences. In several of the conferences, however, it also became clear how a strong socialization agenda asserted itself in relation to assessing and adapting the students' behavior to what the teachers expected of the “good” student, which is why Biesta's concepts of the qualification and socialization agendas both form the basis for illustrating how the implementation of these agendas can inadvertently objectify students, thus limiting their ability to exercise their freedom and, in Rosa's words, to engage in resistance.

### 4. Method

The present article is based on a study conducted in 2021–2022, with a particular focus on students' perspectives on parent-teacher conferences. The empirical material includes observations of 71 parent-teacher conferences in the 8th and 9th grades, followed by interviews with students, teachers, and parents conducted at five different schools. Among these, three schools are situated in a middle-class area within a medium-sized Danish town, while the remaining two are located in more socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. At all five schools, the conferences are held in the traditional way for a Danish context with the participation of the Danish and maths teacher, the student, and his/her parents, and the conversations are primarily teacher-led, although at one school efforts are being made to give the students' voices more space in the conversation. The interview data includes four focus group interviews, involving a total of 22 students as well as four individual interviews with students and their parents and five interviews with one teacher from each

school. Recordings were made for the entire duration of all conferences and interviews. The observations were conducted as non-participatory observations, with one researcher present in the room.

Following Gibson's (2012) recommendations, we conducted our interviews after the observations, using the observations to shape the format and questions. In our interview guide, we incorporated some of the themes identified during the observations, while also inquiring about the interviewees' more general experiences with parent-teacher conferences.

In the interviews with the teachers, we asked them what they saw as the primary purpose of the parent-teacher conference. Four out of the five teachers answered that the primary purpose is to inform the parents and the student about the student's academic development. The teachers' answers are here in line with the Danish Primary School Act, where, as previously mentioned, it is pointed out that parents and students must be continuously informed about the student's benefit from the teaching. The teachers argued that it is important to prepare the students for the final exam in the 9th grade, so that the students do as well as possible in relation to being able to start a youth education. The majority of the teachers thus saw the purpose of the conference as informing parents and the student about what was important for the student to work on to improve in the run-up to the final exam. The last teacher, however, had a different perspective on the purpose of the conversation. At the school, they had for a longer period focused on how they wanted to organize parent-teacher conferences. Among other things, they had talked about the importance of letting the students have more say in the conferences and of playing down the strong academic focus that they felt had been prominent in the conferences, in order to let the students' well-being be at the center. Although four of the five interviewed teachers emphasized the students' academic development as the primary focus of the conference, all five teachers articulated the student's general well-being at school as an important focus of the conference. The conferences at the five schools also all began with the teachers asking the students how they felt at school. In four out of the five schools, however, the teachers took over the speaking time quite quickly and directed the conversation to the students' academic level and areas for future improvement. Thus, in four out of the five schools, it appears that the teachers primarily see their role in the conferences as an expert role, where they inform the student (and parents) about the student's academic level and make suggestions for areas of improvement. At the fifth school, however, the teachers tried to relinquish their expert role and let the students' perspectives take up more of the conversation.

In the student interviews, we asked about the students' general experiences of the conversation, and a certain pattern emerged here. Thus, it was clear that the majority of the students who basically did well at school and got good grades found the parent-teacher conference to be fine, while the overwhelming majority of the students who had difficulty living up to the school's demands and expectations experienced the conversations as anxiety-inducing and unpleasant. Several of the academically low-achieving students thus described the interview as a place where they had to go in and be 'judged' in front of their parents. Another pattern that emerged across both the academically high- and low-achieving students was a taken-for-granted understanding that it is the teacher who is the expert and therefore also the teacher who should have the most speaking time during the conference. Something thus indicated that the understanding of the teacher as the one who must inform students and parents was so embedded in the students' understanding of the parent-teacher conference that they did not immediately question this.

The choice of focus group interviews for the majority of students was made with the intention of reducing the asymmetrical power dynamic between children and adults in the interview situation (Warming 2011). The intention was that students, in interaction with their peers, would express themselves more freely and engage in mutual meaning-making discussions (Halkier 2010), including addressing any issues that might arise, rather than being interviewed individually. We observed a high level of participation and discussion in the interviews, both through students building on each other's responses and through dis-

agreements about whether the parent-teacher conference was perceived as predominantly positive or negative. Our observations also informed the selection of the four student and parent interviews, aiming to capture both student and parent perspectives on conferences that, based on the observations, appeared more or less successful. In two of the conferences, students clearly displayed discomfort—a girl kept her head down and hidden behind her hair throughout the conference, and a boy began crying during the conference. In contrast, the other two conferences were characterized by students appearing calm and engaging in dialogue with the teacher.

The research project primarily revolves around shedding light on the practice of parent-teacher conferences for students in underprivileged situations. Consequently, the analyses predominantly delve into the dialogues and encounters of these specific students.

### 5. 'I Usually Don't Say Much. I Just Sit There and Let Them Talk'

When it comes to questions about the rights of children and young people, Lundi, among others, has pointed out that creating spaces for children's participation is not just about giving them the opportunity to say something, but also about creating trusting environments where children can develop, form, and express their own perspectives (Lundi 2007). In our study of parent-teacher conferences, we noted that the way these conversations were structured failed to create a trusting atmosphere and offered limited opportunities for students to voice their perspectives regarding their own school life. Conversely, it became evident that a strong emphasis on students' individual performance and the mentions of various tests and assessments presented to them during these conversations created a range of feelings of alienation, particularly among the students who struggled to meet the school's requirements and expectations. In the following excerpts, three students share their experiences of participating in parent-teacher conferences.

**Tilde:** 'Well, it can be a bit awkward at times when they sit there and say, 'You're not doing this and that right', and your mom is sitting right next to you. It gets a bit more, you know...'

**Interviewer:** 'Do you get shy in front of your mom then, or...?'

**Tilde:** 'Yeah... I usually don't say much. I just sit there and let them talk. If they ask me something, I'll answer. But otherwise, I don't really say much.'

**Kaja:** 'I generally don't say much in parent-teacher meetings and other conversations... like, because I have, I don't feel particularly comfortable with these things, I think. I don't feel comfortable just sitting there and talking a lot.'

When Tilde and Kaja both express a reluctance to participate in parent-teacher conferences, and 'say something in the conversation', this reflects what Rosa terms as dispositional alienation. Rosa's concepts of dispositional resonance and dispositional alienation highlight the idea that students from privileged educational backgrounds have a more supportive environment, where they can build confidence in their abilities. In contrast, for students from less privileged backgrounds, the school can be an alienating environment (Rosa 2021, p. 285). This concept of dispositional alienation helps explain Tilde and Kaja's avoidance strategy, as it reflects a way of perceiving the world as threatening and hurtful, aligning with negative expectations about their abilities (ibid., p. 286). Given their existing status as academically low-performing, these two students are already in a vulnerable position, and the parent-teacher conference seems to worsen this situation. The core issue here is that the conference, framed as a place focused on optimizing students' academic performance, places additional performance expectations on students who are already struggling due to the demands of the school system. Confrontations with negative assessments and recommendations for improvement intensify the students' sense of alienation, where participating in the conversation is associated with anxiety about facing the teachers' judgments, which is why they remain silent.

Kryger (2012) notes a similar phenomenon in his research on parent-teacher meetings, referring to it as a specific strategy employed by students known as 'damage control'.

This strategy involves students maintaining a passive stance during the conversation, simply waiting for it to conclude with the goal of avoiding causing any unnecessary harm (ibid., p. 100). Consistent with this strategy, it is clear that Tilde and Kaja, in an effort to shield themselves from a potentially hurtful and unsafe situation, detach from engaging with the world and miss out on opportunities to be actively involved and create resonant experiences. These resonant experiences refer to a deeper and more meaningful connection with the educational process, where students have the chance to feel heard and engage in a mutual dialogue with their teachers.

## 6. The 'Right Mindset'

In this section, we present an illustrative example that underscores how, in our research, parent-teacher conferences extend beyond a sole focus on academic outcomes, as demonstrated in the earlier cases. The conferences also involve a socialization process, encouraging students to self-evaluate and reflect on the concept of being an 'exemplary'/'ideal' student. This aspect becomes evident in the following example, where the idea of having the 'right mindset' becomes a focal point. The example is an excerpt from an observation during a parent-teacher conference involving the student Fatima. In contrast to the prior cases, Fatima strives to express herself with a distinct voice and seeks to have her perspectives recognized in the conference. Fatima's educational journey in Denmark commenced in the 7th grade when she relocated from a Middle Eastern country, arriving with no prior knowledge of the Danish language. Currently, she is in the 9th grade. Fatima encounters notable challenges due to her Danish language skills not aligning with those of her ethnically Danish peers, resulting in difficulties in meeting academic expectations, particularly in the Danish language and literature.

The parent-teacher conference begins with the Danish teacher, Lise, asking Fatima about where she envisions herself next year. Fatima responds that she would like to attend high school, but if her grades are not high enough, she's considering taking a 10th-grade class in English.

**Lise:** 'Why does it have to be in English and not in Danish? After all, you're dealing with Danish, right?'

**Fatima:** 'I know, but I'm not very good at Danish, and I just feel completely lost if I go to high-school. . .'

**Lise:** 'I think it's a fine realization to have, that you're challenged by Danish. It's a good awareness. But don't you think you should stay in Denmark?'

**Fatima:** 'Well. . . I haven't really thought about it.'

**Lise:** 'So, I think that's a real shame. I believe you've shown a few times this school year that you can actually do it when you get up and present something.'

**Fatima:** 'But it's so difficult! And it'll get better if I study in English. That's what I want!'

**Lise:** 'What do you want?'

**Fatima:** 'I want to study in English.'

**Lise:** 'Well, you live in Denmark and, you know what, in Denmark. . . now you have the opportunity to learn and do it your way, but that resistance there. . . I have to say, you have a final exam coming up this summer. You have to take the Danish exam. But if you don't care about it. . . I mean, I think it's a shame (. . .) You need to keep up with your schoolwork, and that's what I'm getting at (. . .) it's about facing challenges and that when we confront you with them, you get that mind set like. . . and we can't talk to you in a positive and constructive way. I'm here to help you, but you have to reach out, you have to say 'please', does that make sense?'

**Fatima:** 'Mm.' (hesitantly affirmative)

**Lise:** 'What do you plan to do from now on, do you think? What do you intend to do from now until the summer vacation?'

**Fatima:** 'I need to improve my Danish.'

**Lise:** 'So, Fatima, you're making some adjustments now... making adjustments means that you sort of turn things around, and when we come to help you, push you, it's for your own good. What do you think about that? How do you feel about having to spend three-quarters of a year here at school where we're essentially pushing you to speak Danish?'

**Fatima:** 'It's hard for me.'

**Lise:** 'It's tough, but I have to say... what do you say?'

**Fatima:** 'But I have to work on it.'

**Lise:** 'You have to work on it!'

In contrast to the earlier examples, we can observe a different dynamic in the case of Fatima. Here, she actively engages by expressing her desire to pursue an English-language education. However, her aspirations, as well as her acknowledgment of the difficulty she faces in speaking Danish, are not acknowledged by the teacher. The teacher, following Biesta's concepts, approaches the conversation with an emphasis on qualification and socialization, making these the primary purposes of their interaction. Biesta recognizes the importance of schools in both qualifying and socializing students. Nevertheless, Fatima's conversation serves as an illustration of how a strong emphasis on qualification and socialization can restrict her ability to actively engage in the dialogue as a subject. This limitation prevents her from freely expressing her agreement or disagreement, resisting conforming to the teacher's recommendations, or expressing any form of independent thought. Similarly, [Knudsen \(2010\)](#) highlights the challenges students face when attempting to challenge teachers during these conversations, as any resistance is often perceived as a disruption to the expected passive and obedient student role (*ibid.*, p. 137).

The student's interaction with the teacher plays a pivotal role in shaping their perception of the school as either a nurturing, resonant space or, conversely, an alienating one. In Fatima's case, where her interaction with the teacher during the parent-teacher conference leaves her feeling unheard and misunderstood, the conversation turns into an alienating experience. This, in turn, becomes an integral part of her overall perception and experience of the school. This alienation is further evident in the latter part of the conversation, where Fatima gradually resigns herself to the teacher's recommendations. When asked about her plans until the summer vacation, Fatima complies and responds, 'I will improve my Danish.' In line with Rosa's concepts, this demonstrates that Fatima is not afforded the opportunity to voice her own opinions but rather echoes the teacher's expectations.

In the following two examples, following the instance with Fatima, we demonstrate how the socialization of students also becomes evident in the form of 'emotional formation'. The analysis indicates that in these conversations, there can also be an assessment of students' emotional engagement with school, with an emphasis on being an open and cheerful student.

From a parent-teacher conference with the student Sophie:

**Teacher:** 'Let me get your papers. You're developing. Remember, when you sit, your hair should be to the side. Like this: "Here I am!" It becomes very closed off, and it's challenging to approach you. That could be a first step, and you should move all the way to the front of the class, so you can participate.'

From a parent-teacher conference with the student Albert:

**Teacher:** 'You seem like you're feeling down. You're free to share if something is weighing on you.'

**Albert:** 'It's not because something is bothering me. It's just... it's because we had you for so many hours. I mean, it's not that it was bad, but maybe you



noticed it more because you had us for so many hours. I usually always smile, and...'

**Teacher:** 'Yes, and I can see that now... I can feel it all the way over here at my desk. So, I think maybe it's just a one-time thing, I hope?'

**Albert:** 'Yes, of course.'

When Sophie is provided with guidance on how to emotionally engage with school by fostering a positive and open attitude, and when Albert tries to justify his usual cheerful demeanor during the teachers' lessons by stating, 'I usually always smile...', it becomes clear that the issue goes beyond the mere recognition of students' opinions, as exemplified in the case of Fatima. It also encompasses the students' rights to be subjects with their own emotions and the potential to experience and express resistance against the school's agenda.

### 7. Amplifying Student Voices: Rethinking Parent-Teacher Conferences for Subjectification and Resonance

When teachers refrain from basing parent-teacher conferences on standardized criteria such as tests and exam assignments, it creates an opportunity for students to gain more experience as active participants who can emerge as subjects in their own right, with their own opinions, rather than just being objects of the teachers' expectations. The opportunity for students to actively participate in resonant educational practices (Rosa 2021), involving them in the freedom to connect with themselves as subjects (Biesta 2021), should be interpreted as creating the conditions for students to perceive themselves as valuable and to develop a healthy sense of self within the school community. What is interesting about the following accounts is that the teachers Karl and Firat had an intention to structure the conversation differently from their previous approaches. This intention was achieved by approaching the parent-teacher conference with a listening approach. Guided by the question, 'What can I do to ensure you are doing well in school?' their aim was to engage the students in a collaborative dialogue about their school life.

In the following excerpt, we hear a couple of parents of a 9th-grade student reflecting on their experiences of participating in a parent-teacher conference with Karl and Firat. The interview begins with a retrospective look at their previous experiences with parent-teacher conferences:

**Mother:** 'Once, we left a school-home meeting with a previous teacher, a math teacher, where she thoroughly told Maria all the things, she was bad at.'

**Interviewer:** 'Yes?'

**Mother:** 'She forgot to mention all the things she was good at so, when we left, she went home in tears and said, "I can't, I'm not good at math." (...) And mathematics, it's also difficult if it doesn't come naturally to someone, and I'm convinced that when you hear that from such an authority, it also hits deep.'

In the following discussion, the parents highlight how the conference with Karl and Firat differed from their previous experiences, focusing more on open dialogue and collaborative discussions about their daughter's school life.

**Mother:** 'Well, I think this conversation was a bit different from how it usually goes.'

**Interviewer:** 'Yes, could you tell us a bit about how it was different?'

**Mother:** 'I would say that from the first parent-teacher conference up until this one, I felt that this conversation focused more on the interaction that a student and a teacher can have. This conversation encouraged more of a dialogue, as opposed to the other parent-teacher conferences we've attended, where it was more like "you need to get better at this" and "you need to improve at that", and "you should raise your hand more", you know, more directive things. Here, it

was more like “what can we do to make sure you feel good here, what can we do to help you?”

**Father:** ‘Well, in the past, or at least that’s how I perceived it, it was a one-way communication. You would be informed about where your child stands academically and socially at school. Here, it was a communication, a dialogue about how to promote the well-being and development of the child, the student in school, so that was really, really great.’

**Interviewer:** ‘And why is it important for you that Maria gets the opportunity to speak, to have that time to express herself? What significance does it hold for you?’

**Mother:** ‘It’s because we send our child to a place without us to protect her and look after her, right? So, I find it comforting to witness the dialogue and the contact she has with the adults she interacts with on a daily basis.’

**Father:** ‘Well, because it’s a fantastic approach, we are definitely not the only ones who’ve had the experience that it’s only Maria they’ve spoken nicely to.’

In the interview, the parents express enthusiasm about their recent parent-teacher conference experience, which they perceive as a ‘dialogic’ conversation, placing the ‘interaction between the student and teacher’ at its core. We interpret the parents’ positive comments about the parent-teacher conference as an endorsement, considering their previous experiences with such conferences as a zone of alienation, where the teachers’ evaluations negatively affected Maria’s self-esteem and belief in her own abilities. In the interview, the parents’ positive experience with the parent-teacher conference reflects a shift in the conversation’s focus from directives like ‘you need to get better at this’ to ‘what can we do to make sure you feel good here?’ This shift demonstrates the parents’ concern for the well-being and development of their child, as the father describes it: ‘Here, it was a communication, a dialogue about how to promote the well-being and development of the child, the student in school, so that was really great.’

Gert Biesta has voiced concerns about the ‘learnification’ of the educational field and the perception of teachers solely as facilitators for learning, which he regards as a simplistic and misleading approach to education. Biesta emphasizes that education should not be limited to the act of ‘imparting knowledge’ or merely facilitating learning; instead, it should be about understanding what education accomplishes for the student and how it benefits them. When the parents highlight the value of their daughter Maria engaging in respectful dialogue with the teacher during the parent-teacher conference, it signifies their appreciation of the conference as a space where Maria has the freedom to participate actively in the conversation. This participation allows Maria to bring her ‘subjectivity into play’, as described by Biesta. It underscores that the conference is more than just about conveying information or giving directives; it is about fostering meaningful interactions that contribute positively to the student’s development and overall well-being.

Building upon the theme of the previous discussion, another example from Karl and Firat’s parent-teacher conferences features a 9th-grade student, Maj. Maj’s perspective on school is marked by her belief that she struggles with schoolwork and her general reluctance to engage with it. Earlier in the conversation, Maj was asked about her school experience and invited to share her thoughts on what teachers could do to enhance her comfort within the school environment. In the subsequent segment, the teachers’ active involvement becomes the catalyst for Maj’s voice to emerge and be acknowledged.

**Karl:** ‘And the cool thing about social studies is that you need to have an opinion.’

**Maj:** ‘But the problem is, I’m not interested in it.’

**Firat:** ‘Then you should start watching the news.’

**Maj:** ‘News! What do I need that for? I’m fourteen years old; I don’t want to sit around watching the news.’

**Firat:** 'A whole lot! For example, if the parliament says, "Your mom would get fined if her child smokes." Do you have an opinion on whether the state should interfere with what your mom allows you to do?'

**Maj:** 'Yes!'

**Firat:** 'Why?'

**Maj:** 'Because it's none of other people's business whether I smoke or not.'

**Karl:** 'Why not?'

**Maj:** 'Well, because if I want to put something in my mouth and set it on fire, I'll do it. There's no need for someone to come and tell me I can't.'

**Karl:** 'But society has to pay if you get sick from it.'

**Maj:** 'Well, then, they should pay for something else instead of paying for me.'

**Firat:** 'But that's not how society is organized; should we just let you die?'

**Maj:** 'Yes, let me die, it's my choice!'

**Karl:** 'Can you see what you're doing?'

**Maj:** 'Well, it's my choice.' (laughs)

**Karl:** 'Yes, but you have an opinion, Maj, and you're arguing for it!'

**Firat:** 'But can't you see that I've made you talk about a topic, and I can see that you're engaged.'

**Maj:** 'I'm getting annoyed!'

**Karl:** 'Yes, do you know what it is? It's social studies. Politics.'

**Maj:** 'Well, it'll end with me getting up and shouting in your face because I'm getting annoyed.'

**Firat:** 'Well, then you can go ahead.'

**Firat:** 'Maj, if you think of something we should do better, now we're over time, it's been six minutes, right? So, if you think there's something we should do better, if I should do something better, if Karl should do something better, then you must come to us.'

For a parent-teacher conference to transform into a space of resonance, it is necessary to establish an environment free from fear, where the student feels confident enough to actively engage with the world. When teachers, guided by their sensitivity to Maj's need for autonomy and self-determination, initiate a dialogue about her right to smoke, they create a space where she interacts with the world in a manner that allows her responses and the teacher's counterarguments to coexist. This space becomes a realm of resonance, where Maj actively participates and, in doing so, discovers her capacity 'to articulate her perspective' and 'possess an opinion', as articulated by the teacher. As Rosa underscores, resonance is not about echoing the teacher's voice but rather about fostering resistance, granting the student opportunities to explore their own abilities through interactions with the world. From this perspective, one can perceive the parent-teacher conference with Maj as a scenario in which, through an active involvement in the conversation, she connects with herself as a subject.

From Biesta's viewpoint, education as subjectification must be closely linked to freedom. When Maj informs the teacher that she may reach a point where she shouts at him, and he subsequently replies with, 'well, then you can go ahead', it can be interpreted as Maj is being provided with the opportunity to embrace her autonomy. This situation places her existence as a subject at the forefront because it hinges entirely on her individual choice and action as it is up to her and only her how she will act.

In our observations of Karl and Firat's parent-teacher conferences, we recognized that their efforts to integrate the students' perspectives into the conversation, thus creating

room for the students' subjectification, were practically realized through their intuition and empathy in their interactions with each student's unique emotional state and needs. It is important to emphasize that the teachers' attempts to make space for students' voices and viewpoints were persistently challenged by the prevailing school culture regarding parent-teacher conferences when parents inquired about their children's test results. Despite these obstacles, the teachers' innovative approach served as a foundation for initiating a forward-looking conversation on how to establish a less anxiety-inducing framework for parent-teacher conferences that prioritize children's participation and their fundamental right to express themselves about their perspectives on the school life that we expect them to engage in.

## 8. Discussion and Final Conclusions

The central argument of this article is that a society committed to upholding children's rights to freely articulate their views on matters that concern their lives, as outlined in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, should implement educational practices that guarantee students the opportunity to voice their perspectives and have them acknowledged as valid. The parent-teacher conference is thus one of the few settings in school where the students actually have the opportunity to talk to the teachers about their school life together with their parents. Consequently, the limited possibility for students to express their views during these conferences raises concerns.

This problem is further emphasized by the fact that, in the declaration of purpose of the Danish Primary School Act, i.e., it is emphasized that the school must 'prepare the students for participation, co-responsibility, rights and duties and that the school's function must be characterized by freedom of spirit, equality and democracy'. As illustrated through the article, the practices that exist around the parent-teacher conferences have a strong focus on academic results and optimization of learning. Thus, in the first section of the analyses, we have shed light on how the conferences can give rise to experiences of alienation among the students. This occurs when optimization strategies and academic standards dominate the pedagogical practices surrounding these conferences. As our analyses also show, it is not only the students' academic performance that is subject to evaluation, but also their approach to going to school with expectations of being happy, outgoing, and receptive to the teachers' recommendations.

Drawing from Rosa's perspective on resonance, our analyses highlight that when students perceive the conversation as a means of assessing their performance or when teachers restrict students' emotions and opinions about their future aspirations, the conversation can become an unsafe place. In such instances, students may find it necessary to protect themselves against the critical gazes of teachers and parents by either refraining from active engagement in the conversation or by adopting the teachers' perspectives as their own. Our analyses, referencing Biesta, also underline that when qualification and socialization take precedence, and students are reduced to objects evaluated by external criteria, they are simultaneously deprived of the opportunity to express their views regarding the school life that we expect them to engage in.

In the last section, we have demonstrated through two examples that it is possible to provide young individuals with experiences of the conversation as a resonance space, which has the potential to allow them to fulfill their rights to express their opinions, feelings, and views in parent-teacher conferences. Our analysis suggests that the teachers' empathy and situational awareness concerning each student's emotions and needs are critical for the student's ability to participate actively in the conversation. In this context, the student becomes more than a mere reflection or an echo of the teacher; they become a subject capable of actively contributing to the shaping of the agenda of the parent-teacher conferences. From a perspective of change, Rosa and Biesta offer valuable analytical insights that enable us to focus on students' opportunities to engage with their own voices and perspectives in collaboration with the teacher. This perspective necessitates a redefinition of the student's role and status in the conversation, granting the student space to pursue

their own interests, respond to the teacher's input, and share their perspectives on their school life as independent subjects of their own right. As illustrated, our interviews with both teachers and students show an apparently taken-for-granted understanding that the primary purpose of the parent-teacher conference is for the teachers to inform the student and parents about the student's academic level, as well as point out areas for improvement, and thus that it is the teacher's perspectives that must be at the center of the conversation. With this article, we hope to challenge this taken-for-granted understanding and to highlight the importance of giving students the opportunity to be active and participative in matters that concern their own lives. We also hope that the article can give rise to future reflections about the purpose of the parent-teacher conference in a school that should ensure the students' rights to express themselves freely in relation to their own lives.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, C.I.S.S. and S.H.; methodology, C.I.S.S. and S.H.; validation, C.I.S.S. and S.H.; formal analysis, C.I.S.S. and S.H.; investigation, C.I.S.S. and S.H.; resources, C.I.S.S. and S.H.; data curation, C.I.S.S. and S.H.; writing—original draft preparation, C.I.S.S. and S.H.; writing—review and editing, C.I.S.S. and S.H. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** According to Danish law, it is only certain types of health science research projects, which must be approved by the National Committee on Health Research Ethics. Research at University College Absalon follows the Danish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, which is based on the Declaration of Helsinki. The above referenced project is not a health science project, hence no formal ethical approval is necessary in Denmark.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors on request.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

- Ball, Stephen John. 2003. The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity. *Journal of Education Policy* 18: 215–28. [CrossRef]
- Bekendtgørelse af lov om folkeskolen. 2022. Available online: <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2022/1396#id73c451e7-10bb-40dc-8fac-311fbc943490> (accessed on 15 January 2024).
- Benson, Barbara P., and Susan P. Barnett. 2005. *Student-Led Conferencing Using Showcase Portfolios*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin.
- Biesta, Gert. 2009. Good education in an age of measurement: On the need to reconnect with the question of purpose of education. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability* 21: 33–46. [CrossRef]
- Biesta, Gert. 2021. *World-Centred Education: A View from the Present*. Abingdon: Taylor & Francis Ltd.
- EMU. 2017. Available online: <https://www.emu.dk/sites/default/files/2019-03/GSK%20-%20puljeprogram%20-%20For%C3%A6ldresamarbejde%20Elevstyrede%20skole%20hjem%20samtaler.pdf> (accessed on 15 January 2024).
- Förster, Rosalie. 2016. When boundaries become permeable: Conversations at parent-teacher conferences and their meaning for constitution of an institution. *Journal of Applied Linguistic and Professional Practice* 10: 23. [CrossRef]
- Gibson, Jen. 2012. Interviews and Focus Groups with Children: Methods That Match Children's Developing Competencies. *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 4: 148–59.
- Halkier, Bente. 2010. Fokusgrupper. In *Kvalitative Metoder: En Grundbog*. Edited by Svend Brinkmann and Lene Tanggaard. København: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Helms, Stine. 2017. (U)Synlig evaluering i skolen—Et studie af elevplanens rekontekstualisering i praksis. Ph.D. thesis, Roskilde Universitet, Roskilde, Denmark.
- Helms, Stine. 2020. Inddragelse, modstand og forhandling i skole-hjem-samtalen. *Studier i Lærer Uddannelse Og-Profession* 5: 31–51. [CrossRef]
- Helms, Stine Constance, and Clara Ina Severin Steensen. 2023. Skole-hjem-samtaler som fremmedgørelseszoner og resonansrum. *Dansk Pædagogisk Tidsskrift* 1: 78–94.
- Helms, Stine Constance, and Clara Ina Severin Steensen. 2024. *Skole-hjem-samtalen som (u)bæredygtig praksis*. Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag.
- Hofvendahl, Johan. 2006. 'Noa har inga fel': Om bristfokus i skolans utvecklingssamtal ['Noa has no mistakes': On the deficiency focus of parent-teacher-student conferences]. *Utbildning & Demokrati* 15: 61–81.

- Knudsen, Hanne. 2010. *Har vi en aftale?: Magt og ansvar i mødet mellem folkeskole og familie*. Frederiksberg: Nyt fra Samfundsvidenskaberne.
- Kotthoff, Helga. 2015. Narrative constructions of school-oriented parenthood during parent-teacher-conferences. *Linguistics and Education* 31: 286–303. [CrossRef]
- Kryger, Niels. 2012. Ungdomsidentitet—Mellem skole og hjem. In *Hvem sagde samarbejde? Et hverdagslivsstudie af skole-hjem-relationer*. Edited by Karen Ida Dannesboe, Niels Kryger, Charlotte Palludan and Birte Ravn. Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, pp. 89–130.
- Kryger, Niels, and Birte Ravn. 2007. Skole-hjem-samarbejde—For barnets bedste? In *Nye sociale teknologier i folkeskolen—Kampen om dannelsen*. Edited by Lejf Moos. Frederikshavn: Dafolo.
- Lendrum, Ann, Alexandra Barlow, and Neil Humphrey. 2015. Developing positive school-home relationships through structured conversations with parents of learners with special educational needs and disabilities. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs* 15: 87–96. [CrossRef]
- Lundi, Laura. 2007. 'Voice' is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal* 33: 927–42. [CrossRef]
- Moos, Lejf. 2016. *Pædagogisk ledelse i en læringsmålstyret skole*. København: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Pihlgren, Ann. 2006. *Lärande Möten: Utvecklingssamtal som Leds av Barn och Ungdomar. [Development Dialogues Led by Children and Adolescents]*. Norrtälje: Norna.
- Rosa, Hartmut. 2021. *Resonance, a Sociology of the Relationship to the World*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Rosa, Hartmut, and Wolfgang Endres. 2017. *Resonanspædagogik—Når det knitrer i klasseværelset*. København: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Steensen, Clara Ina Severin. 2023. Hvor solidaritet er længsel og inspiration utopi: En afhandling om læreres engagement og kritik i en målstyret skole. Ph.D. thesis, Roskilde Universitet, Roskilde, Denmark.
- Tholander, Michael. 2011. Student-led conferencing as democratic practice. *Children & Society* 25: 239–50.
- Warming, Hanne. 2011. *Børneperspektiver—børn som ligeværdige medspillere i socialt og pædagogisk arbejde*. København: Akademisk Forlag.

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.