Schoolbags as sensitive objects in children’s school identities

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In this paper, I explore the entanglement of school related objects, such as the school bag, and children’s identity processes within a Danish school context. As a central institution in the Danish welfare state, school is a formative project shaping future citizens. Consequently, school is a social and cultural context in children’s lives and a context for children’s identity processes. Furthermore, increased parental involvement in children’s school has an impact on children’s everyday lives as school is extended into the family. Based on ethnographic research on children’s school day and navigations in school-home relations I address the way school is experienced and affects children’s identity processes and the role school bags play in such processes. More specific, I examine how the school bag becomes a sensitive object evoking certain feelings regarding school. This happens in two interconnected ways. In children’s use of their school bags and in the way school bags becomes an object for parental involvement, and a tool for adult monitoring of children. By addressing these issues I emphasise how experiences of school as something comfortable or uncomfortable is materialised through the school bag (and other objects) and becomes part ongoing processes of shaping identities as a poor or good student. Inspired by materiality studies (e.g. Miller 2008, 2009, Frykman & Frykman 2016) as well as anthropological childhood studies, the paper addresses questions of childhood, affect and materiality in ethnographic research within the field of education.

Keywords: materiality, identity, school, school-home-relations, ethnographic methods