

Chapter 6

Strengths of the Lower Secondary System

Abstract. The Examiners found that the Danish education system has many strong features, and performs well in many respects. Strengths of the lower secondary system include a strong commitment to education, solid investment, local control, parental choice, an active role for parents, dedicated staff, strong support for students and a desire for improvement and development. These strengths should provide a base on which improvements can be built.

Introduction

The Review Team was impressed with many aspects of life in Denmark. We found all those whom we met were interested in our task. Danish educators were helpful and many went out of their way to provide us with information to aid us in our work. We saw at first hand much evidence of the richness of education at primary and lower secondary levels in the *Folkeskole*. We were particularly impressed with the following 15 features of the system.

Traditions of democracy

Denmark is a country with a long tradition of democratic government. It was unified in the 10th century and, following a period of absolutism, has been a constitutional monarchy since 1849 when suffrage was introduced for many males. Women (and servants) received the right to vote in 1915. The Constitution was revised in 1953 when one of the chambers, the *Landsting*, was abolished and a single legislative chamber, the *Folketing*, was established. The current Queen, Margrethe II, came to the throne in 1972. Denmark joined the European Union in 1973, but rejected membership of the Euro zone in 2000. The last general election was held in 2001. Currently, eight political parties are represented amongst the 179 seats in Parliament (together with seats dedicated to representation from Greenland and the Faeroe Islands).

The system of proportional representation means that governments are composed of coalitions made up of a number of political parties. In fact, no single party has ever secured an overall majority and, as a result, policies have to emerge as a result of consensus and conciliation. The two largest parties currently in Parliament are the Liberals (56 seats) and the Social Democrats (52 seats). The current government is made up of a coalition of the Conservative Party and the Liberal Party with support from the Danish People's Party and the Christian Democrats.

Democracy plays a role both in the form and content of schooling. According to the Ministry of Education:

The pupils are taking part in the decision-making process through their participation in a number of decision-making fora at school. As far as the actual teaching is concerned, it is the teacher who is responsible for the establishment of targets for the learning and for the choice of working methods and subject matter in co-operation with the pupils. And the education for active participation in

democracy starts by involving the pupils during their time at school and making them responsible for the decisions taken. Only by doing so is it possible to ensure the credibility of the education in democracy (Danish Ministry of Education Website, undated).

Commitment to education

Denmark has committed itself to an education system designed to maximise the development of individuals through whatever is deemed the most effective means. Thus, whilst the nine-year education process is obligatory, there is no compulsory schooling; children can be educated at home or in any part of the diverse private, but financially supported, provision. The education system has been characterised in an earlier OECD report as “...generous, inclusive, complex, expensive and relatively leisurely in pace” (OECD, 1995, p. 94).

Several amendments have been passed by the Parliament since the last *Folkeskole* Act became law in 1993. The latest major change was passed by Parliament in April 2003. The act lays out the academic, social and societal aims for this phase of schooling:

- “... further the pupils’ acquisition of knowledge, skills, working methods and ways of expressing themselves and thus contribute to the all-round personal development of the individual pupil.”
- “... endeavour to create such opportunities for experience, industry and absorption that the pupils develop awareness, imagination and an urge to learn, so that they acquire confidence in their own possibilities and a background for forming independent judgements and for taking personal action.”
- “... make the pupils familiar with Danish culture and contribute to their understanding of other cultures and of man’s interaction with nature.”
- “... the school shall prepare the pupils for active participation, joint responsibility, conduct of rights and duties in a society based on freedom and democracy.”
- “... the teaching of the school and its daily life as such must therefore build on intellectual freedom, equality and democracy.” (Danish Ministry of Education, 1995, Chapter 1)

A project undertaken collaboratively by the Ministry of Education with the National Association of Local Authorities and the Danish Teachers' Union entitled *The Folkeskole in the Year 2000* summarised the need for improvement:

The globalization and the transition to a knowledge and learning society will have an influence on the qualification requirements of the future and intensify the need for life-long learning. At the same time, it will intensify the demands on the Folkeskole as a community - and equality enhancing factor.

Publications arising from the project stated:

The Ministry of Education, the National Association of Local Authorities, and the Danish Union of Teachers have individually and together taken a number of initiatives to support the work carried out by the individual municipality and the individual school with the overall aims of the Folkeskole. (Danish Ministry of Education, National Association of Local Authorities and Danish Union of Teachers, 1998)

The OECD Team was impressed with these aspirations for democracy and with the collaborations that led to them. Whilst, as we will show later, it is our view that Denmark has to overcome a number of problems – such as shifting from worthy aspirations to achieving results – if the performance of its students is to improve substantially, we believe the country has laid a solid foundation from which excellence can grow.

Investment effort in education

Denmark, like the other Nordic countries, invests high levels of resources in its education system, as we illustrated with the comparative figures shown in the last chapter. The Nordic countries differ, however, in how the money is used, as Table 6.1 illustrates.

Table 6.1 Expenditure by Staff and Other Costs for Primary, Secondary and Post-Secondary Non-Tertiary Education

Country	% Staff Costs	% Other Costs
Denmark	78.4	21.6
Canada	76.4	23.6
Finland	68.4	31.6
Norway	81.7	18.3
Sweden	61.6	38.4
United Kingdom	73.6	26.4
OECD	80.3	19.7

NK= not known

Source: OECD, 2003a, Table B6.3 p.247.

In terms of the split between staff salaries and other costs, Denmark devotes less than both Norway and the OECD average but more than Finland and Sweden, both of which have about one-third of the available resources for non-staffing costs and correspondingly greater flexibility in their budgeting. OECD data also indicate that Denmark spends 52% of its current expenditure on teachers' salaries in comparison to 56% in Finland and 53% in the United Kingdom (OECD, 2003a, Table B6.3, p. 247). The high non-teaching costs in Denmark are probably due to the amount of school-leisure time schemes that are available.

It could be argued that Denmark's commitment to staff costs limits its ability to fund other activities but we prefer to see this as an acceptance that people matter and that teachers and pedagogues are the most important factors in the education service.

The country's longstanding investment in education is impressive. A political consensus that education matters, and is thus worthy of public investment, has ensured that all recent Danish governments have maintained this commitment. However, as we and a number of commentators have stressed, it is important that commensurate value for this level of expenditure is achieved. The evidence from the analysis of PISA results suggests that this is not the case.

There will be some critics who will see this evidence as an opportunity to reduce the amount of investment in education. In the view of the Team this would be a very short-sighted action to take given the world interest in educational improvement. In our discussions with politicians and practitioners we did not detect a loss of support for education itself; what we detected was a loss of *uncritical* support. The way to deal with this discrepancy – in our view – is not to reduce the level of funding, but to find

ways to enhance the value it achieves. This is what the measures we will recommend in the next chapter will endeavour to achieve.

Local control

A democratic approach to the oversight of schools distributes both powers and responsibilities across different levels of government (271 municipalities and 13 counties not including Bornholm region, Frederiksberg Municipality and Copenhagen City, which have the dual responsibility as municipality and county) as well as to the schools themselves. This means that the distribution of powers and responsibilities within the Danish system can sometimes appear complex, and that roles and accountabilities may not always be clear to those new to the system.

The Danish Ministry of Education, under the Minister of Education, holds responsibility for the overall system but, because of its decentralised nature, has few formal powers over its daily functioning (as indicated in the last chapter). It sets policy frameworks and can require the other partners in governance to work within these but, in comparison with the equivalent ministries in some of the reference countries, its powers appear deliberately weak and non-interventionist. But this can also be a strength in a decentralised system which depends on collaboration between the various parties, each of which holds specific roles and responsibilities. The benefits are that there is local ownership of the schools by the communities and that important decisions are taken by elected officials close to the issues.

The 271 municipalities are responsible for the establishment of pre-school classes and for the educational provision in the basic school and [10th year] including special education and other special educational assistance for all children and young people under 18 who live in the municipality and whose parents wish them to be enrolled in the *Folkeskole*. They also hold responsibility for the special educational assistance to children who have not yet started school. (Danish Ministry of Education, 1995)

The school boards are made up of a majority of parents (elected for a period of four years) together with teachers, students (all elected for one year) and, where decided, a non-voting member of the municipal council. The chairperson has to be a parent and the school leader acts as the secretary to the board. The municipality has the power to pay per diem allowances and compensation for lost earnings to parents.

Within the municipal guidelines the school boards are responsible for laying down the principles for the activities of the school. They approve the budget and oversee the organisation of teaching, co-operation between the

school and the home, the distribution of work between the teachers, the provision of teaching materials and the school rules.

Recommendations to the municipal council regarding the appointments of the school leader and the teachers are also submitted by the school boards. In practice, the boards exercise control over the employment of staff. They also draw up a proposal for the curricula of the school and for any innovative work which falls outside the target and framework laid down by the municipality.

Pedagogical councils consisting of all staff performing teaching and pedagogic tasks are required to be established at all schools. The pedagogical council can only offer advice but, in day-to-day practise at the school, the school leader is often seen as being dependent on the maintenance of good relations with the teachers, the council and the school's teachers' union representatives.

The school leader and the teaching staff are thus independent and yet accountable to the school board, the municipality and the ministry, each of which possesses formally determined legal powers.

The 13 counties (and one region plus the Copenhagen and Frederiksberg Municipalities) exercise economic control of the upper secondary schools, gymnasiums and schools for Higher Preparatory Examination Courses (HF courses) but have no responsibility for quality control or evaluation of the teaching. They also maintain responsibility for adult education centres, special education for the severely disabled as well as some special services such as the Pedagogical-Psychological Counselling Service.

We can see benefits in this decentralised approach. We understand the value of involving so many authorities in the leadership and management of schools. We respect the confidence the Danish state places in parents. We have been particularly impressed by the way politicians at all levels of government have found ways of working productively across party lines. In a later chapter, however, we discuss some of the possible disadvantages of such a decentralised system.

Availability of choices

Parents exert a number of choices over the education of their children. At present, parents can choose a school outside their district if the municipality permits this as an option. Furthermore, acceptance will depend on the availability of a place in the appropriate class. This situation is, however, currently under review and the possibility of an extension of choice may be included in future legislation.

If they so wish, parents can select private provision. In 1991, the Danish Parliament approved a Private School Act which introduced a new public grant system for private schools. This gives them a grant towards the operational expenditures “per pupil per year”. This is intended to match the equivalent public expenditures of the municipal schools, less the fees paid by the parents of the pupils in the private schools. In 2002, the average grant towards the operational expenditures per pupil per year amounted to DKK 41 100 and the average fees paid by the parents amounted to DKK 7 600 (Communication from the Danish Ministry of Education).

Private schools in Denmark may be roughly divided into the following categories:

- Small “Grundtvigian” independent schools in rural districts;
- Academically oriented lower secondary schools;
- Religious or congregational schools;
- Progressive free schools;
- Schools with a particular pedagogical aim, such as the Rudolf Steiner schools;
- German minority schools.

Parents can request that their children be taught some optional subjects. For instance, German and French are offered as a second foreign language (in the 7th to 9th year); French or German as a third foreign language; word processing; technology; media; art; photography; film knowledge; drama; music; needlework; wood/metalwork; home economics; engine knowledge and other workshop subjects; and various vocational studies (in the 8th to 10th year). Furthermore, Latin may be offered to the pupils in the 10th year.

Parents can also enrol their children in a residential or non-residential *Efterskole* environment. Children can attend from year eight to year ten – a maximum of three years, though the overwhelming majority attend for only one school year. The first *Efterskole* was established in 1815 by Kristen Kold, who wanted to build a bridge between the end of compulsory education and “popular” education to keep the young people between the ages of 14 and 18 “mentally alert”. Until 1970, two-thirds of the *Efterskole* were based on the ideas of Kold, and the majority of the students came from rural areas. In 1967, the *Efterskole* were allowed to prepare the pupils for the final examinations of the *Folkeskole*.

Today the *Efterskole* is approved and subsidised by the state provided it is an independent, self-governing boarding school offering general education to pupils between 14 and 18 years of age, often with a curriculum specialisation (gymnastics, for example). The school leader designs its curriculum according to the ideas and wishes of the school board, the teachers and the parents. Most *Efterskole*, however, prepare their students for the same final examinations as are undertaken by the *Folkeskole*.

Some *Efterskole* focus on special education and offer practical work as a special opportunity for late developers and “non-bookish” children who have failed to thrive in the ordinary school system.

Students are entitled to state support and municipal councils offer additional support. In general, parents pay 28-51% of the cost of education, board and lodging. The average amount paid is 42%.

Finally, parents can formally request a place at any of the upper secondary institutions, although their children may face an entrance examination if their grades are below those normally expected for the gymnasia.

Of course, such choices depend to some extent on knowing that the choices exist as well as on a family’s geographical circumstances; not everybody will live near enough to the school they favour for all the choices to be realistic. Furthermore, some provision – such as residential schooling – will involve extra expenditure, although grants are available to help parents on low incomes.

Our Team has been impressed by the range of choices available to parents. Denmark, it seems to us, takes choice seriously and provides support – governance and financial help – to those who wish to avail themselves of it. And, in the last resort, parents are entitled to start their own schools – provided they can attract a minimum number of students – and claim state support.

Active role of parents

Parent power appears to be a reality in Denmark. Parents can exercise considerable choice over the school their child attends. They are involved – with the child and the teacher – in setting individual goals. They have the right to file complaints. The child will normally be with the same group of children from year one to year nine. In very few cases a child can advance or be held back one year. In that case a decision from the school leader requires an acceptance by the parents in order to be legitimate. Finally, as we have

noted and according to certain conditions, a group of parents has the right to set up its own private school.

Parents play the key role on the school boards – always in the majority and always taking the chair – which provide the governance for all *Folkeskole*. They also have an association of school board members which provides national representation and training to its members.

We have been impressed with the manner in which Denmark appears to offer real power to parents over many aspects of the education system as well as over the education of their own children.

Dedicated school leaders, teachers and support staff

We met a number of impressive school leaders, teachers and support staff working in the schools we visited. These educators appeared to have adequate time for preparation and marking. They also enjoyed the opportunity, within their contractual time, for many team meetings about a variety of subjects. Sometimes, these took place under the auspices of the schools' pedagogical councils. The teachers can work in teams and can institute innovative practices. Their knowledge of individual students and their problems, and their concern over the well being of each student, was clearly evident in our visits.

Whilst, later in this report, we will raise questions about the adequacy of training and the optimal use of resources, it is our view that the existence of such a professional body is essential to the success of any system.

Adequate premises, equipment and personnel

We were impressed with the general quality of the buildings we visited. Although some were old they appeared to have been well maintained. There was very little evidence of wilful damage or graffiti. The amount and quantity of equipment also appeared more than adequate and, in some cases, schools were outstandingly well equipped. Where we visited libraries these were well stocked. Computer equipment appeared to be in good supply and the OECD figures confirm that the system has one of the most favourable ratios between students and computers. The "drivers' license" certificate which recognises teachers' competence in information technology appears to have been successfully implemented. The facilities for physical education and sporting activities appeared good.

We observed the innovative and highly efficient use of facilities in one school in Copenhagen where after-school care was located in the same premises that the children used during their school hours. This provided a

safe environment for the students, as well as facilitating communications between teachers and pedagogues (child-care staff).

The average class sizes in Denmark are comparatively small. The OECD figures show them to be 19 for primary and 18.6 for lower secondary, larger than only Iceland and well below the international average of 22 at primary and 24 at lower secondary levels (OECD, 2003a, Table D2.1, p. 210).

Table 6.2 Ratio of Students to Teaching Staff for Primary and Lower Secondary Students

Country	Primary	Lower Secondary
Denmark	10.0	11.1
Canada	18.3	18.4
Finland	16.1	10.9
Norway	11.6	9.3
Sweden	12.4	12.4
United Kingdom	20.5	17.3
OECD	17.0	14.5

Source: OECD, 2003a, Table D2.2, p330.

The figures in Table 6.2 are calculated by dividing the number of students by the number of teachers (expressed as full time equivalents). As may be seen, Denmark has the most favourable ratio in the primary column and the third lowest in the lower secondary (next to Norway and Finland). Interestingly, of the countries shown, two (Canada and Sweden) have virtually identical ratios for both categories of classes.

Finland, Norway and the United Kingdom have more favourable ratios in the older groups of students. Finland has a policy of gradually raising its staff funding from pre-primary up to lower secondary on the rationale that problems will be more frequent amongst older students. The United Kingdom has a similar outcome but has recently been making efforts to reverse this policy on the grounds that money invested in very young children will pay off at a later date. Only Denmark appears to have invested systematically in smaller ratios in the primary years.

The measure illustrates the actual staffing available to the school. It cannot be used as an indication of class size, however, as this depends on the way the teachers are deployed within the school. That deployment will take into account the amount of time allowed for preparation, meetings and other non-teaching activities.

Confident young people

We were assured by those we met that Danish schools produce confident young people. The PISA data show that Danish youth, to a greater extent than young people from other countries, have high self-esteem and feel they control much of their own education. These feelings contribute to the self-reliance that PISA found amongst Danish students and was borne out by all those students we met. They displayed impressive self confidence (as well as outstanding English language skills).

Happy students

All of the students and parents we encountered stressed how pleased they were with the schooling offered. In this respect their views were similar to the general view expressed to us by the Parents' Association that, on the whole, Danish students are happy to attend school.

One of the main reasons for these positive attitudes is likely to be the good relationships that appear to exist between teachers and their students. Data from the PISA study show that students from Denmark scored relatively highly on the "sense of belonging" scale. They also show that over 60% (in comparison to an OECD average of 56%) of the sample believed that their teachers showed interest in their learning.

Strong support for students

The Danish education system offers considerable support to its students. All schooling is free. Charges for out-of-school leisure activities are modest and grants are available for those facing financial difficulties.

We were impressed with the resources dedicated for use by the severely disabled in one school which shared its site with a primary-age *Folkeskole*. We were less impressed with the opportunities available for mildly disabled students as we will discuss in the next chapter.

Reduced gender differences

The PISA reading literacy data illustrate that, although there are differences between the sexes in Denmark, they are relatively small. In Denmark, as in most countries, girls outperform boys in reading skills but the difference between their scores was considerably less than the OECD average and was half the size of that found in the Finnish sample.

However, in both mathematical literacy and scientific literacy the gender differences within the Danish sample were larger than any of the reference countries and, in both cases, showed females performing less well than males. We interpreted the small differences between female and male scores in reading as positive, a feature of the striving for equity in the Danish system. One of our Danish respondents, however, suggested that this could also be seen as a sign that Danish female students – unlike their Nordic counterparts – failed to capitalise upon the linguistic superiority over boys that is found in most other countries.

Integration of bilingual learners

In the school year 2002/03, there were 55 812 (or 9.5 %) bilingual learners in primary and lower secondary schooling. Bilingual students can be defined as: "...children who have a mother tongue other than Danish, and who first learn Danish through contact with the surrounding community, possibly a school...", (National Board of Education Centre for Professional Development, 1997, p. 133). Official policy states that:

The Government wishes to see a society where diversity and personal freedom flourish, together with a community based on fundamental values. There must be room for diversity and room for cultural and religious activity. The right of the individual to choose his/her own life must be respected (Danish Government Policy Paper, 2003).

This is a worthy aim and one which fits well with the dominant values of the education system. Later in this Report we will raise questions about the level of provision for these 55 812 bilingual learners but we remain impressed with this stated aim.

Scope for innovations

One of the benefits of such a decentralised education service is the freedom that local authorities and groups of parents have to innovate. There are many such projects and we were only able to witness a few but we were impressed by a number of examples.

- Experimental integration of schooling and after school care in a school in Copenhagen.
- The model of flexible schooling and the project on gifted children adopted in schools in Lyngby Taarbaek.

- An experimental approach which has created a lower secondary school resourced with extra information technology equipment rather than an extensive library of textbooks in Copenhagen.
- The institution of system-wide screening of students for language difficulties in Ishøj.
- The adoption of portfolios as the principal learning tool in schools in Aarhus.
- The early-morning special-needs support organised by a small rural school in Rudkøbing.

Whilst such projects need careful evaluation, it is a demonstration of the strength of the system that they exist.

Desire for improvement

As noted in the last chapter, the Ministry of Education inaugurated a millennium programme for improvement which lasted from 1998 to 2001. It set out very clear aims for the schools:

The school is to give the pupils knowledge and proficiencies. It is to develop awareness, imagination and an urge to learn, and it shall introduce the pupils to the Danish society ... There is general agreement about the necessity of:

- General subject-specific skills, *e.g.* in reading/writing/arithmetic;
- Foreign languages and the use of information technology;
- Personal qualifications such as creativity, cooperation, independence and intellectual skills;
- Specific competencies related to working life.

Globalisation and the transition to a “knowledge and learning” society will have an influence on the qualification requirements of the future and intensify the need for life-long learning. At the same time, it will intensify the demands on the *Folkeskole* as a community – and equality enhancing factor (*The Folkeskole in the Year 2000*, 2003).

Furthermore, all the local government representatives we met (and especially the mayors) stressed their support for improvement. The Review

Team was impressed with their interest in, and commitment to, the *Folkeskole*. We believe that a national school improvement project would garner support from the local authorities.

We also recognise the request for the OECD review by the Danish Government to be a clear sign that it has a desire to improve the existing system by drawing on international experience and recognised good practice. With only one or two exceptions, we report that the responses to our questions have also been positive across the whole range of our respondents.

Conclusions

The points we have noted illustrate a number of the unquestionable strengths of the *Folkeskole*. Because our review, of necessity, is limited, we have undoubtedly omitted numerous other positive features. Nevertheless, the account as it stands is impressive and Danish educators, whilst being anxious for further improvement, should be proud of all the positive features of the *Folkeskole* which have been built up over the years. Our next chapter will endeavour to balance the picture by presenting an account of the weaknesses that we also observed.

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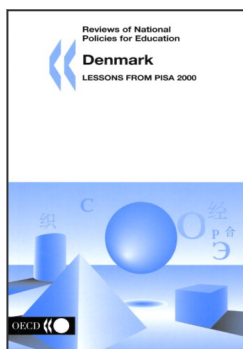
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