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Introduction

The comparative study of different, national education systems has had a long history of looking behind common curriculum priorities and classroom practices to discover the underlying values that shape educational thinking within a particular cultural context. Such studies have drawn attention to the fact that the aims and structure of national education systems have evolved from the deeply held social and political values of a society and that these are not simply differences of opinion but are connected to a society's fundamental beliefs and attitudes which draw on separate cultural and historical pasts.

However, it can also be difficult for those who operate within a system to recognise the importance of such embedded values. This article, therefore, draws on empirical data from two comparative studies (McNess 2002, Osborn et al 2002) to discuss, from an 'outsider's' point of view, the underlying values that can be identified in the priorities and practice of teachers in the Danish *folkeskole*. Following a short discussion of the historical development of schooling in Denmark, the article will draw attention to the continuing values which appear in current educational policy and are evidence in the structure and organisation of the Danish *folkeskole*. The core concept of the Danish class teacher (*klasselærer*) will be explained and illustrated through a short profile of Birgith at Vestskolen¹.

The historical context

Denmark has been a relatively homogeneous, democratic state since 1849. But the early years of the nineteenth century, when formal schooling was first established, were difficult times for the Danish people. It was a period of national impoverishment and stagnation when the relatively well-to-do independent, peasant farmers began to take over both economically and politically from the 'despairing' ruling élites [Bjerg 1991]. It has been argued that it was this relative weakness of the Danish bourgeoisie, together with a lack of natural resources and the late industrialization of Denmark, which enabled the peasant farmers to develop a '*consciousness of themselves as a class and understood themselves to be the real backbone of society*' [Østergård 1993:213]. They succeeded in establishing an independent culture with

¹ The name of both class teacher and school are pseudonyms

education institutions of their own, which were greatly influenced by the writings of the philosopher and clergyman, N.F.S.Grundtvig. Grundtvig was concerned with the decline of the Danish self-image and emphasised the importance of mother-tongue and the '*living word*' in supporting 'popular enlightenment' (folkeoplysning) through a liberal education. His view was that the '*living word*' should be transferred by means of a dynamic, verbal relationship between teacher and pupil, enabling an individual's everyday life to be seen in the context of an historical consciousness [Østergård 1993].

Thus a powerful 'folk' tradition of local democracy and social partnership has created a communitarian approach to education, characterising it as a universal right to personal development through joint action which is concerned with supporting and building communities. The view of education as a universal resource to develop a people's sense of identity and enable them to take an active part in democratic decision-making remains at the core of Danish education policy. Within this context, education has traditionally been seen as a joint enterprise in which individual schools are relatively independent but highly integrated with, and accountable to, the local community. An inclusive approach to school organisation and curricula places a clear focus on the personal development of individuals and the need to develop co-operative learning for joint action. The rights of pupils and their parents to have some influence on content and pedagogy.

Current Education Policy Priorities

One of the most striking features of the Danish education system is the joint role which teachers, parents, pupils and local communities play in policy development, where experimentation is encouraged and consensus is paramount. The Danish system continues to put a great deal of emphasis on local involvement and 'flat' management structures. The State, while retaining a regulating and co-ordinating role within a national framework, continues to encourage local power, school democracy and the importance of student rights within education [Lauglo1995]. The current Folkeskole Act states that, wherever possible, the working methods and selection of subject matter should be determined through cooperation between teachers and pupils. A commitment to a common, non-selective, democratic form of school organization, based on the ideal of equal opportunities for all, assumes that democratic citizens are formed within a democratic environment through experience with others who are different from themselves [Bjerg *et al.* 1995]. Thus, an emphasis on community, citizen formation and social cohesion,

combined with a commitment to a common core of learning for all children, continues to influence the structure and organization of Danish schools. To illustrate this, Section 1 of the current *Act on the Folkeskole* clearly states that:

The Folkeskole shall - in cooperation with the parents - 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.

The Folkeskole shall 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 committing themselves and taking action.

The Folkeskole shall familiarize the pupils 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 participation, joint responsibility, rights and duties in a society based on freedom and democracy. The teaching of the school and its daily life must therefore build on intellectual freedom, equality and democracy.

[Source: Act on the Folkeskole, 2007, Ministry of Education]

Thus, the relationship between home and school, the central role of personal development for the purposes of joint action, and the practical application of democratic principles are clearly defined.

The Danish Folkeskole

Almost uniquely within Europe, primary and lower secondary education in Denmark is contained within one system: the *folkeskole*. Most children attend a free, non-selective local community school which, typically, provides places for approximately 400 to 500 pupils between the ages of six and 17 years of age. Pupils are divided into grades by age and progression from one grade to another is automatic. Groups of between fifteen and twenty children are divided into separate classes [*klasser*] which each have a class teacher [*klasselærer*] who may have a central responsibility for the same group of pupils for the whole of their primary and lower secondary schooling.

Pupil assessment, for the most part, is both continuous and formative and does not include individual pupil marks until Grade 7 [14 years of age]. The current Folkeskole Act requires close cooperation between school and home and an ongoing dialogue is sought

between teachers, parents and pupils. Pupils and parents must be regularly (at least twice a year) appraised of the school's opinion about how each pupil is profiting from her/his schooling. This refers explicitly to information as to the pupil's personal and social development as well as his purely academic attainment.

During the last two decades, parents and pupils have become increasingly involved in the management of individual schools through School Boards, as well as less formal school councils. Management within the *folkeskole* is also democratically structured so that a relatively flat management structure requires the head teacher to work with colleagues to ensure consensus on any major changes. There is no national school inspection service in Denmark, but schools are encouraged and supported in their own self-assessment. More recently, concerns over quality have resulted in the introduction of a new initiative for Quality Development within the Folkeskole.

The Role of the Danish Class Teacher

The concept of the Danish class teacher (*klasselærer*) is core to the values which drive the Danish education system and has been an established feature of Danish schooling since 1870. Harrit et al. (1992:85) refer to the role as 'pivotal' and go on to characterize the aims of the class teacher as:

...to ensure the most propitious environment in the class she leads. For us the one basic educational aim is that the pupils become more independent and self-motivated, i.e. that they themselves assume responsibility for their own learning process. And in a wider context, too, for their own lives. This is the teacher's long-range educational aim.

As well as teaching their own class several of their academic subjects, the class teacher also leads and coordinates a small team of other teachers to cover the full curriculum. There is a general, organizing principle within Denmark that children in the first five or six years of their education should be taught by as few teachers as possible and that this tightly knit team should be led and managed by the class teacher. The class teacher also has a clear pastoral responsibility to create both unity within the class and liaise closely, and regularly, with the parents of their pupils. During the weekly 'class hour' [*klassens time*], either as a separate, timetabled period or integrated into other lessons, the class teacher is also able to build up

close relationships with their pupils and investigate issues of concern to them. The underlying democratic values that lie behind this are explained by Harrit et al (1992:87):

‘planning and decisions can be focused upon, debated, and discussed.....The pupils cannot take part in these democratic activities without training and support, but the form teacher can use supportive dialogue. In addition, the traditional democratic rules of order can be practised.’

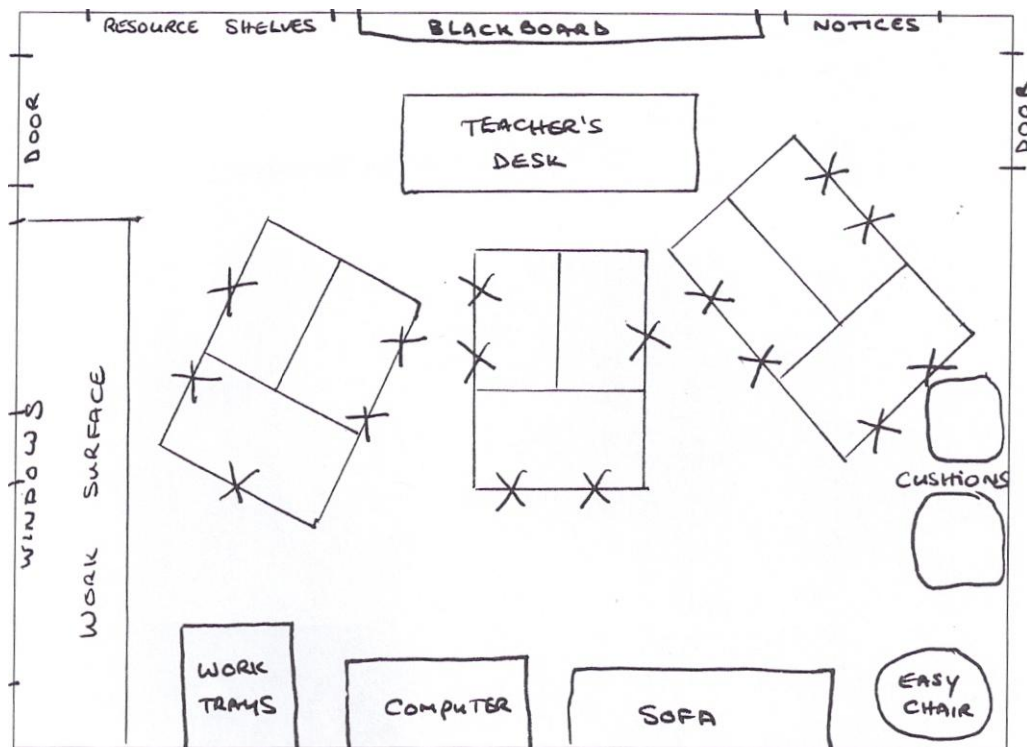
In this way, each pupil group in Denmark has a teacher that has a long-term (a class teacher may remain with the same class for the whole of their primary and lower secondary schooling) additional role as counsellor, encouraging maximum contact between the family and the school. Pupils and parents can relate to a stable figure that is entirely responsible for the class's social welfare. Importantly, the role of the class teacher is considered to be one which is complementary to, rather than replacing, that of the parents. The close and on-going relationship, with a relatively small group of pupils, is intended to endorse the view of the class teacher as a significant ‘other’, able to empathize with the children and induct them into a democratic process.

Typically, most class teachers also spend some of their time teaching additional subjects to pupils in classes throughout the age range, as part of other class teams, which helps to integrate the different classes within the school.

The way in which these principals are operationalised is described below.

A Professional Profile of Birgith at Vestskolen

Birgith’s class of sixteen pupils [*klasse 3a*] was one of three Grade 3 classes (9 and 10 year-olds) in Vestskolen at the time of the study (McNess 2002). The pupils had been divided into the different classes using a combination of gender and social criteria in order to make all Grade 3 classes as similar as possible. As was usual in Danish schools, the layout and facilities within the classroom were the result of negotiation between Birgith and the pupils. Diagram 1, below, shows the layout of Birgith’s classroom:



As well as pupils working in groups of four or five around tables, there was a feeling of spaciousness and informality within the classroom which opened onto playgrounds from one side and an indoor communal games area from the other. Significantly, when asked if the pupils would retain their area of relaxed sitting at the back of the classroom in the following school year, Birgith said that it would be a matter of negotiation between herself and the children - 'If they want it, they can keep it'.

Workload and Working Practices

Birgith taught her class Danish, history and music. She was a keen musician and made use of a fully equipped music studio within the school to get all her pupils singing and playing instruments together as a group. Birgith was also responsible for the co-ordination of two other teachers, one male and one female, who formed the class team responsible for Class 3a. One was another Grade 3 class teacher who taught Class 3a mathematics and science. The other was a Grade 6 class teacher who taught Birgith's class art and religion. All three Grade 3 classes were taught physical education together by specialist teachers in a well-equipped

and spacious sports hall, though their class teachers were also present for these sessions. In addition to their teaching responsibilities, the three teachers who formed the teaching team for Class 3 also had time allocated to them to meet together under Birgith's leadership to prepare a curriculum year plan which was sent home to parents at the beginning of each school year. This was necessarily general in nature, for as Birgith said, '*the detailed planning happens each week, or even each day, as things change*', underlining the flexibility and autonomy enjoyed by Birgith and her colleagues in curriculum matters.

Each month Birgith, in common with the majority of Danish class teachers, sent home a newsletter updating parents on progress and letting them know of future teaching and learning projects. In putting together this newsletter, Birgith would consult with the other teachers in her team so that their comments could be included. Birgith laid great emphasis on her relationship with the parents of her pupils and met with them as a group twice a year to discuss any issues which either she or they might have about the class group. She explained it in this way:

The class teacher calls in all the parents in her class. All the class teachers have a meeting on the same night - no children. We have our first meeting to welcome them back to school and present the year plan towards the end of August - when they have been back for three weeks. At that first meeting all the classes in the schools are calling their parents in and having this meeting in August/September. The purpose of that meeting is to tell the parents what will go on through the year - the 'activity' calendar. And in terms of the subjects, we will have written that down and we will have had the children for 2 or 3 weeks and I say what's going on now, how are they, it's good to have them back, or there is a problem with their behaviour or whatever. I have that one and another one after Christmas, in February. We can do that if we need it and I always do it because I think it's good.

Birgith also explained how she managed the two parent consultation evenings at which she was available to talk to parents individually, together with their children, about the progress they were making, both academically and socially. Birgith considered that it was very important to prepare her pupils appropriately for these meetings and the pupils could find them stressful:

Twice a year we have a meeting with individual children and their parents. There is a statutory one in November and then we have another one in March. This is a three-way conversation. Before this takes place, we also talk to each child on their own. I think this is important because it can be a stressful time for the pupils. I think they should know what we are going to talk about and so I give them some questions and they write their answers and then we talk about it together. We do that before the three-way conversation because I think it is good for the child to know what we are going to talk

about. So, actually, it is like a performance, How are you? Do you like school? They feel fine with it and they are more comfortable too.

This careful preparation is an indication of the importance placed on the process.

Professional Aims and Aspirations

When asked about the qualities of a good class teacher, Birgith was clear that as well as good subject knowledge it included an ability to empathize with the children and to create an environment in which they felt safe and happy:

I would say that every day we have a good laugh. It is so important to laugh together and to feel safe. It is important to me that children feel safe with me. Subject knowledge? Oh that's important, we should also be smart good at our work and at our subject.

This linked into to her general aims for primary education which she saw as two-fold, combining good subject knowledge with personal development, within a secular, communitarian ideology which emphasised the importance of co-operation and good citizenship. It also illustrates the partnership between parents:

Two things – educating them well in all the subjects, that's one thing. The other thing is to be in a group, to respect other people, all the good human manners. I think that is very important and I think the parents can't give the children that, it is the school's responsibility. Educating a good human being, and a good citizen. Good moral code, though not in a religious way.

When asked to whom she felt accountable, Birgith considered that her first responsibility was to her pupils and, secondly, to their parents. However, this was very much limited by a professional confidence which saw her as the 'expert' in the relationship:

The children! Of course parents too, but first of all the children because the parents don't know what my job is. I will tell them about it and they can ask me all they want, the door is open but I am the one who decides what I am doing because that's what I'm good at! When I teach student teachers I say never defend yourself as a teacher but tell them what you are doing, explain, do not go on the defensive. This is what I am doing, explain what and why and then they (parents) will understand. I think that is very important.

When asked about the extent to which she felt accountable to the head teacher, Birgith's answer was more ambiguous:

The head teacher? Actually none because – well, perhaps I do. She is the person within the school who has ultimate responsibility if there is something wrong or I need her help. If I am doing something wrong and the parents call her or the students go to her, she will ask me what is all this about and I will explain. She will say I think we should do this or that. If I have a call from the parents and they argue with me I say, ‘Stop this and we will arrange a meeting with the head teacher’. I will say to her I want you to be there as the person who is responsible for the whole school and as a third party, so that you can listen to the parents and to me and listen to what is going on here. In that way, we have responsibility to each other. But I see this as a moral question and mostly I feel responsible to the children. She (the head) is not there to check on me, she is there for the staff, the children and the parents and she has to have a good overview and she is very good at it.

Birgith also considered that she had a joint responsibility for her pupils which went beyond the school gates. She was part of a community responsibility for the children’s upbringing which included teachers, parents and pedagogues from the School/Freetime Organization [skolefritidsordning, SFO] and included a strong social dimension:

I feel a responsibility for the children outside school, but it is not only my responsibility. I think the child is in the middle and around them are the parents, the school and the teachers, and the pedagogues at the SFO. We are the adults who are taking care of the child. So, I make time to talk with the pupils individually and ask them, ‘How are you getting on in school, how are you at home?’. ‘Do you have any friends, is there something going on at home that I can help you with? Something you want to talk with me about?’ The parents know that, so I consider that we have a responsibility for the child in the whole of their life when we are around them. It is broader than just giving knowledge especially in the early years.

The Danish concept of *dannelse* encompasses this view of education as both a social as well as cognitive project which has a parallel with the German concept of *Bildung*, the French concept of *culture*, and the Greek concept of *paideia*. Despite increasing pressure from policy makers because of the perceived poor results of Danish pupils in large international surveys, Birgith was convinced of its continuing relevance in today’s society:

Dannelse is about how to behave when you are in a group, what language it is appropriate to use with other people... But it is also broader than that. When we compare our children with other nationalities we are not, maybe, such good readers and writers and mathematicians, but we have a lot of knowledge about the whole world and I think it is very good. To concentrate and to go deeper and deeper into some areas of debate, to find out. I think it is important that they learn to be responsible for pollution, *et cetera*, to have an opinion about it. It is about being a good person, a good human being, a good citizen, a good parent, a good co-worker, and so on.

As a consequence of her long experience in teaching, Birgith had noticed changes within society which were causing policy makers to reassess the work of the *folkeskole*. She was

beginning to experience the impact of the greater curriculum demands being made on teachers and had a general concern with regard to the reduction in the number of lessons available for the study of Danish history and culture. Birgith regarded this as detrimental to the general Gundtvigian aims of the Danish education system:

We used to have many more lessons devoted to Danish culture but these have been reducing. It has been calculated that twenty years ago pupils had 1000 more Danish lessons during the ten grades they spent at *folkeskole* than they have today. I think this is a problem because literature, singing, and music are important. Previously, learning songs would play an important part in Danish lessons. The time for this has now been restricted because other lessons have pushed it out and the school hours have reduced. We are now discussing having more lessons again. I think they could take one or two more lessons in grades two and three than they do now. Then we would have more time to do the same but in a more relaxed way and we could put in songs and more funny stuff so they would enjoy learning more. Now, if we do what we are supposed to, we don't have time.

This concern with a curriculum which was more subject orientated and had less space for creative teaching was also related, for Birgith, to the space and time that was available to her for developing close relationships with her pupils. Though unsure about the extent of the change she was especially concerned as the class teacher of young pupils whom she believed needed support and understanding in their home lives, as well as with their school work:

...you don't have time and then you don't listen to what they are saying, usually there are lots of hands saying 'Me too, Me too' and there is no time. I could do with more Danish lessons, I would like to have more. Maybe it is because I am a class teacher and so Danish culture and discussion are important because I need to be close to my students, and I don't think that I have enough time to listen to them. They might want to tell me about their little dog or something. I think I had more time to listen to them before but I am not sure as it is some time since I was teaching the little ones because I have been teaching the older ones and been teaching abroad so I am not really sure if I did have more time. I think with the older children they don't need me so much.

Concluding remarks

The ability of the Danish teachers to stay with a relatively small group of pupils over an extended period of time [up to nine years] also suggests that Danish teachers work within a structure which enables them to find more time and space to cope with the demands of the social and emotional needs of their pupils. Finally, a more inclusive management structure and approach to quality control in Danish schools supports a professional culture which can be characterized as being more self-confident and internally driven than that in England. In

other words, the structures within which teachers in Denmark work enable them to use individual agency to create a more confident professional identity for themselves.

Drawing on Bernsteinian theory, Osborn *et al.* [2000] have typified the two models by describing them in the structural terms set out in Figure 1 below:

	A 'Competence Model'	A 'Performance Model'
Organisational Form	Professional, with flat management structure. Control through self-regulation, socialization and internalization of norms	Mechanistic, with hierarchical structure and bureaucracy. Standardization for control and coordination.
Management Style	Collegiate, with emphasis on proficiency, dialogue and consensus. Informality in relationships	Managerial, with emphasis on efficiency and target-setting for results. Greater formality in relationships.
Teacher Roles	Facilitators, with affective dimensions seen as intrinsic to the teaching role.	Instructors and evaluators, with emphasis on cognitive and managerial skills.
Teacher Professionalism	Professional covenant based on trust, and commitment to education as a form of personal development. Confidence, sense of fulfilment and spontaneity in teaching.	Professionalism as the fulfilment of a contract to deliver education, which is seen as a commodity for individuals and a national necessity for economic growth. Less confidence, fulfilment and spontaneity in teaching.
Teacher Accountability	Personal and 'moral', through a process of self-assessment	External and contractual, backed by inspection.

[adapted from Osborn *et al.* 2000:236]

Figure 1: Contrasting 'competence' and 'performance' models of teachers' work

An ideological commitment to the opening up of public services, including education, to the mechanisms of the market in order to ensure 'efficiency' and 'effectiveness', together with a neo-liberal emphasis on free choice and the power of the individual, have combined to create a view of teacher professionalism which is based on contract rather than covenant and ensures accountability through a process of external inspection.

The Danish system emphasizes a 'competence-based' pedagogic model which values self-assessment and personal fulfilment, and continues to stress the importance of co-operative

work and the affective dimension encapsulated in the close relationship between the class teacher and one particular class of pupils.

The aims of citizen formation and social cohesion were at least as important as the aims of individual and collective economic advancement. This case study of Birgith has been used to illustrate various characteristics of Danish education which has been influenced by specific, underlying cultural values. The relatively flat management structures within which Birgith worked, together with high levels of individual teacher autonomy, were typical of many schools in Denmark, as was the inclusive nature which typified her work with parents, and other professional and community colleagues with whom she shared responsibility. The arrangements of small teams of teachers, led by a *klasselærer*, which were responsible for a particular class of pupils was also typical. Birgith demonstrates a commitment to an holistic approach to the curriculum which included joint teaching, project work and the inclusion of topics which had a relevance to their pupils. She also laid great emphasis on the personal and social development of her pupils, and saw an active role for herself in facilitating their ability to learn to work together in preparation for active citizenship.

So it can be seen that within Denmark, as with other Nordic cultures, the classic European tradition has been strongly influenced by communalism, a strong localist model of schooling, and an encyclopaedic approach to knowledge. This has been borne out of a context where small, often rural, communities constitute mono-cultures which share a common religion, language and folk history. In this situation education has been used to reinforce economic and social cohesion. Danish schooling has combined an intellectual and rationalist approach to knowledge with local control over the content and organisation of education, involving parents, teachers and administrators (Ravn 1994). In such a context teachers do not usurp or invade the private sphere too early (children do not begin formal education until they are seven years old) but recognise a strong community function to their role, which combines expert subject knowledge with a responsibility for the development of social solidarity (Harrit et al. 1992).

However, to return to the theme of globalisation which introduced this article, recent changes within Danish society and the need to compete economically with their global competitors are challenging the status quo and calling for new approaches (Winther-Jensen, 2001)

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