



FEATURE

There is nothing like a Dane

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There is nothing like a Dane

*We can learn much of value from Danish schools – and they from ours,
says Iain Mills, Inverclyde's Quality Improvement Officer*

There is something different about the Danes, and something equally distinctive about Danish schools. Earlier this year I visited schools in Skoerping Commune in northern Jutland, and was able to observe at first hand the characteristics of school-age education there and compare them with our own approaches in Scotland. My main areas of interest were values and pupil participation, and what I saw in these areas prompted me to look for the roots of Danish practice; roots that run very deep. The figures that emerged from the Danish mists were not Hans Christian Andersen or Soren Kierkegaard, but Nikolaj Grundtvig and his disciples such as Kristen Kold. To say that these men had a fundamental influence on the philosophy underpinning modern Danish education is a bit like saying that Danes like herring.

Most of the major characteristics of education in Denmark today can be traced back to the philosophy of N.F.S. Grundtvig and to the work of those early pioneers of the Folkeskole movement who implemented his ideas. That his most influential work was done in the first half of the 19th century is surprising, given the remarkably modern feel of what he was advocating. Yet Grundtvig also looked back for much of his inspiration. He believed that a key element in the way forward for schools was the utilisation of the strong traditions found in his and earlier times in Denmark. He believed that learning and children's development should be rooted in the land and enriched by an awareness of the old legends and mythologies, the social and cultural heritage of his people. That much of this should be delivered through dialogue, through communal singing and dance, through going down to the woods to learn, makes this a heady brew indeed.

The casual visitor to a modern Danish school could miss the significance of some of the activities taking place. Pupils reading Danish folk tales, mathematics lessons in the nearby forest, or mythical Norse beasts rearing up from kindergarten grounds might seem like quirks of an individual establishment rather than the playing out of themes that have run through Danish education for at least 150 years. Yet it is the longevity of these themes that has enabled them to become so deep-rooted, so profoundly embedded in contemporary educational thinking in Denmark. Scottish schools looking at values and

participation and trying to imbue their own school culture with a greater sense of democracy or common purpose will find that they lag a long way behind the Danes, and whether or not we have the solid foundations in place to support such developments - the fully worked-through philosophy and commonality of school and societal purpose - remains to be seen. In Denmark, the work of Grundtvig and his followers has been very influential in shaping national consciousness and creating consensus about the purposes of education. In Scotland, the *Curriculum for Excellence* has identified the main purposes of Scottish education, but without drawing as deeply on our traditions, our heritage as the Danes have. It is questionable whether or not, in comparison, the *Curriculum for Excellence* has done more than scratch the surface of public consciousness, never mind tap into something deeper and shared.

At the heart of the Folkeskole movement is a set of beliefs and principles that underpin practice. Young people should be educated for active participation in society and for life rather than being educated to be learned scholars. Practical skills and national history should form part of their instruction. Schools should address the all-round personal development of the individual pupil. Pupils should develop awareness, imagination and an urge to learn, thereby acquiring confidence in their own abilities and possibilities. Schools should prepare pupils for a society based on freedom and democracy. All this is enshrined in the 1994 *Act of the Folkeskole*, but the seeds of it go back to Grundtvig, with followers such as Kold adding the fertiliser to make them grow.

If these are the broad principles, then the values that are intertwined with them are easily recognisable in Danish schools today, and these are not sterile values displayed in a list on a wall, but living values that manifest themselves in the ways schools are run, the ways pupils interact with teachers and with society, the manner in which pupils interact with each other, right down to the way lessons are organised. There is nothing superficial about them. In discussion with educational leaders, with teachers and with pupils, I found certain recurring themes. The central importance of values such as responsibility, honesty, helpfulness and friendship is talked about with passion. Pupils are as ready to defend these values as are teachers. They are often

referred to as 'traditional Danish values', but these values sit as comfortably within the United Nations Convention on Human Rights as in traditional Danish life and heritage.

One of the most interesting elements of my visit to the Folkeskole in Skoerping Commune was my discussion with a hugely impressive group of pupils representing their pupil council. The extent to which values - and a participative ethos - were deeply embedded in their way of thinking and acting was very obvious. Pupils spoke with passion about respect and the importance of helping each other. They gave many examples of how their 'traditional Danish values' manifest themselves in their personal interactions and in the organisation and ethos of classroom and school. They talked about a protest in Aarhus by pupils from all over Jutland, sparked by government moves to axe group awards, angered by what they saw as a denial of their right to work co-operatively and support each other. They spoke about the right of pupils to 'switch off' or quietly disengage in class, while stressing that respect for their peers and tolerance of different viewpoints meant that these pupils would not disrupt the learning of others. In schools in Skoerping Commune, pupils *live* their values.

In 2000, the Danish Minister of Education presented her views on values and education. She acknowledged the central role of the educational sector in the formulation and teaching of values, with schools 'giving young people and adults a clear idea of the value basis on which our society is based'. Nine core values for education have been identified in Denmark, including ones relating to freedom of expression, respect, tolerance, care and community, all of these being viewed as traditional Danish values. Teachers and pupils also referred to honesty, friendship and fairness as being central components of the climate of their schools and the belief systems of their young people. That these are seen as strongly rooted in the culture, heritage and traditions of their own society is probably a strength, lending additional meaning to what they are aiming for and providing a rationale for the way they act. It must be questioned as to whether there really is anything distinctly *Danish* about these core values per se, though it can be argued that their approaches to developing and promoting them is quite distinctive.

For example, work done in many countries across several continents has identified most of these as core or shared values in a number of societies. The Institute of Global Ethics Report (2002) on *Young People Communicating Global Values* looked at the results of work carried out in Guatemala, Canada and Thailand. Across the three countries, the top five

values chosen by students as important to them were respect, freedom, responsibility, truth and fairness. Rushforth Kidder, in his work on ethics, asserts that 'despite differences in religion, philosophy, geographical location, nationality and race, human beings have a common belief in five core values: honesty, responsibility, respect, fairness and compassion'. These bear more than a passing resemblance to what pupils and teachers in Danish schools would tell you are their own core values. These values are universal.

What makes the Danish approach stand out is the way they've worked these values into thought and practice. The aforementioned Education Minister insisted that values and practice had to be closely interconnected. In her view, 'Practice without values becomes emptiness, values without practice will not have the impact to change our society for the better'. Part of this practice comes through direct participation. The Ministry of Education *expects* that pupils and students will be able to exert influence on their day-to-day school life, and most head teachers would not have it any other way, not that their students would allow them to! I saw many examples in Danish schools of internalised values being practised in terms of interpersonal relations, individual actions and whole-school ethos. All this is, of course, helped by the length of time they've been working on it: the first Folkeskole was set up in 1844, 158 years before Learning and Teaching Scotland's guidelines for developing capability for active citizenship were published. If practice makes perfect, then Danish schools have a considerable head start on the rest of the world.

So what can we in Scotland learn from the Danes? That shared values can underpin everything that's done in a school for a start. That these values should be developed from the kindergarten onwards, with constant reinforcement. That values should be *living* values, affecting how we do things and not just paid lip-service to. That schools need to create space and opportunities to allow pupils to take part in activities that can help them to internalise these values, and that pupil participation in the running of the school is high-yield in this respect. We have already taken significant steps forward in Scotland. Work already done in schools in relationship to citizenship (National Priority 4) can be a springboard to greater pupil participation and the development of values in a meaningful way. Local authorities such as South Ayrshire have already taken significant steps forward in relation to shared values, with each school now having its own consensually agreed set of values, and teachers and pupils increasingly confident in talking about them. Other authorities such as Inverclyde and Renfrewshire are now looking to learn from South

Ayrshire and others as part of work on developing values in their own schools. The *Curriculum for Excellence* sets out the purposes of the curriculum, and places values at the heart of this. A focus on developing the whole child - in Early Years, for example - is now in place. We may be hindered by not having the 150-plus years of experience that Danish schools have in this area, and perhaps by not having done the same amount of groundwork to inculcate *shared values* into wider public consciousness; we may not have related our values to our heritage, culture(s) and traditions to the same extent, and at times approaches to values and participation can be tokenistic. However, we are making progress.

There are things that schools in Denmark do well,

and we can certainly learn from them. However, there are also things that they can learn from Scottish schools, and teachers from Skoerping Commune have already made visits to Scotland with this in mind. From my observations in Danish classrooms, there may be issues to do with the pace of learning that we could offer advice on, and some of the excellent work being done in Scottish schools in relation to formative assessment could be exported. I have some concerns, however, about suggestions in Denmark that they may wish to introduce a much stronger focus on summative assessment and target-setting to Danish schools. If this was at the expense of ethos, values and participation - the areas of good practice that we could all learn from - then that really would be an example of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.