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Overview

The public system of education in Denmark is characterized by its organization on comprehensive principles. The education system is an all-through system of education from grade 1 to 9/10 with mixed ability classes. It does not operate a transfer from elementary to lower secondary education, which is common elsewhere, and, consequently, avoids any form of selection at this early stage. Instead, selection occurs at the upper secondary stage. In contrast to Sweden and Norway, which also have comprehensive organization at this stage, the upper secondary education in Denmark is highly divided. The first track is an academic upper secondary school, *gymnasium* (3 years), (or, *HF, højere forberedelseksamen*, Higher Preparatory Qualification, 2 years), the second track consists of two options, business and technical education, (*HHX, højere handelseksamen*, Higher Business Qualification, 3 years; *HTX, højere tekniske uddannelser*, Higher Technical Education, 3 years), and the third track includes a range of vocational training programmes.

In the past, the academic upper secondary school, *gymnasium*, was an elitist school catering for a small number of students from the higher ranks of society, leaving the other educational options with lower parity of esteem. Today, this has been more or

less cancelled out. Firstly, the *gymnasium* now enrolls more than 50 percent of the pupil population, so they can no longer be seen as elitist. Secondly, the quality of technical and vocational training has improved considerably through state and social partner intervention. This has also created an effective transition from technical/vocational school to work and this, in turn, keep youth employment very low. The vocational training programmes, which have about a third of the pupil intake, are organized similarly to the German vocational system in that they represent a modernized form of apprenticeship. The vocational training programmes are based on a dual system, in which learning by participation in work alternates with school-based learning of typically four years.¹

Historically, private education in Denmark has been limited, but is characterized by its extensive diversity. The private schools, which, in fact, cannot be considered strictly private since they receive generous state subsidizes, are not elitist schools, charging high tuition fees and operating restrictive admission policies; rather they are 'community schools' in the sense that they are non-selective, fees are low and in the reach of most parents, and, perhaps most importantly, express particular educational, religious or political values. Animosity between the public and private education sector has been almost absent, which is largely due to the lack of uneven funding and forced competition between schools for well-performing pupils. Although the private school sector has expanded slightly over the last two decades and school choice has been introduced, the majority of parents, in spite of socio-economic background, still prefer to use a public school in the vicinity of their home.

The structure of schooling: The development of comprehensive education

The comprehensive school system in Denmark is a result of a long historical development of creating equality within and between schools. Most European countries pursued more equal education systems during the 1960s and 1970s, but in Denmark, as well as the other Nordic countries, comprehensive schooling had already started by the late nineteenth century. The first important event in this development, which culminated with the School Act of 1903, was the abolishment of the old parallel system of education. On one side was the elementary school attended by children of the rural and urban working classes, and on the other side a nine-year Grammar school which enrolled children of the bourgeoisie. These two schools were transformed into a ladder system of education by the creation of a middle school. The bottom part of the secondary school was removed in order to allow room for the new middle school, which would bridge between the elementary and now upper secondary school. Progression from elementary to middle school was based on reaching a sufficient academic level. Private schools were also discouraged to ensure that the elementary school would serve as the foundation to secondary education.^{2 3}

The School Act of 1903, which created a moderate comprehensive school system, was passed by the influential Liberal Party, *Venstre*, that had assumed governmental power

for the first time in 1901. The Liberal party, like its sister parties in Norway and Sweden, was different than liberal parties outside the Nordic region in terms of its class base and ideology. The Liberal party was not defined by the urban middle class as it tended to be elsewhere, but almost entirely by the farmers. In respect to education, the farmers argued against the elitist Grammar school of the bourgeoisie in order to create a common school for all, which ultimately would enhance “social mixing,” or, expressed with a modern phrase, ‘social cohesion’ in society. Their brand of social liberalism thus differed fundamentally from, for example, the laissez-faire and self-help liberalism of the Liberal Party in Victorian Britain, and was ideologically more conducive toward integrationist education reform than was the British variety.⁴ As soon as the Liberal party in Denmark gained governmental power, it induced democratic measures into education in the form of a ladder system of education.

The ladder system of education allowed children, irrespective of social class, to progress through the system according to academic ability and aptitude, and this opportunity was increasingly taken up mainly by urban, but also rural parents. The children, who were unable to enter the middle school, however, completed their schooling in two upper grades in the elementary school. This situation was considered unfair, as the two upper grades soon became a ‘dumping ground’ for the low achievers. An attempt to solve this problem occurred with the School Act of 1937, which created a practical-oriented four-year middle school with no exam requirements in parallel to the existing academic middle school. Even though the Act was introduced by a Social Democratic and Social Liberal Coalition government, they were not all in favour of comprehensive education at this point in time, and rather believed that a bifurcated school system would better facilitate the different academic abilities of the pupils. However, this new middle school never became popular and, furthermore, concern was increasingly expressed that it exacerbated division of children rather than promoting social integration.⁵

In the post war period, the further development of the school system was an integral part of the construction of the modern welfare state. The Social Democrats reached the peak of their power, and in this capacity they played a key role in the further development of the social services, including the education sector. The Danish welfare state was designed not just to protect its citizens from income loss due to ill health, old age and other misfortunes, but to create a new society, one that was firmly based on values of social equity and universal rights. Leading Social Democratic reformers saw the public sector as a way of pursuing egalitarianism by producing services itself, and thereby ensuring that citizens were free from depending on the market. The social sector consisted, and still consists, of a universal social security system of flat-rate and income-related benefits, which are generous by international standards, and a wide range of tax-funded, publicly provided social services, including health care, care services for children and elderly, and free compulsory schooling and higher education for all.⁶

Education, it was believed, should not only be provided universally and free of charge, its organisation should also promote egalitarian values and equal opportunities. The Social Democrats, who received wide support from other political parties and teacher

unions, embarked on the abolishment of the selective middle school system with the view to create an even more unified education system. In 1958, a majority government consisting of Social Democrats, Social Liberals, and a small left-wing party, *Retsforbundet*, abolished the middle school, and in its place introduced a seven-year comprehensive school. Unable to reach an agreement about streaming in the last two grades (grade 6 and grade 7) in core subjects, the parties ended up with a compromise, which implied that such tracking should be enforced unless the majority of the parents opposed it and preferred mixed ability classes. Parents generally opted for the latter solution, and as a result tracking was gradually abolished, and a seven-year comprehensive school introduced nationwide.

During the 1960s and 1970s the Social Democrats radicalised their advocacy for comprehensive schooling by demanding that it last nine, or sometimes even twelve, years, with mixed ability classes, and no exams and grades at all. Drawing from theories of progressive education, they argued that the school was distinctive in its own right, and should not merely be regarded as an institution for academic preparation for secondary education. Any severe pressures on pupils to perform academically should be removed, and instead a learning environment should be created that was pertinent to the development of children's needs, abilities and interests. The Liberal Party, in principal, embraced the idea of comprehensive education, but dug in its heels at these radical demands, and maintained that tracking, although not too early, should still be enforced so as to ensure academic standards. The political debate, which also included the powerful teacher unions, parents' organisations, and public intellectuals, was resolved through a compromise. According to the School Act of 1975, that was passed by the Social Democratic government, a nine-year comprehensive school should be established; however, exams and grades were to be maintained as well as tracking at grade eight and nine in core subjects. Tracking was only to be used as a 'soft' measure, which implied that it should not be determined by academic ability of the pupils, but the extent of the syllabus. However, the Education Minister, Ritt Bjerregård, in line with the School Act of 1958, was able to negotiate that tracking could be abolished after approval of the local school authorities.

During the 1980s, Denmark was not immune to neo-liberal and neo-conservative policies on education that flourished particularly in the Anglo-Saxon countries. The comprehensive school system was increasingly attacked by the Conservatives for focusing more on the social aspects of the education process than on academic standards and employer-relevant skills. From 1982 until 1993, a conservative government was in power in Denmark, and the long-serving Education Minister Bertel Haarder tried to reform the education system along these lines through a voucher scheme, school choice, private schools, and a curriculum with stronger focus on academic achievement and with deeper roots in national culture and heritage. Many of his initiatives were curbed, however, mainly due to the powerful opposition from the teacher unions and political parties on the left, spearheaded by Ole Vig Jensen from the Radical Left. Bertel Haarder's most radical market-oriented policy was the introduction of a voucher scheme, whereby parents could choose a different public school than the one allocated to them by the municipality. After change of

government in 1991, Ole Vig Jensen was appointed Education Minister, and initiated a reform of the school system so as to consolidate the comprehensive school system in particular with regards to the question about tracking. Consequently, a School Act was passed in 1993, which introduced mixed ability classes throughout the entire school system. The Act allowed some form of ability grouping, however. It was stipulated that grouping had to be organised in flexible ways – it was not permitted to plan ability grouping from the outset of a school year – and in restricted periods of time. The teaching method to facilitate mixed ability classes was called ‘differential teaching’, which implied individualised teaching for each child at his or her own academic level, as well as group teaching, or projects, based on academic topics and interests of the pupils.

The Education Minister also embraced the previous government’s policy on decentralisation, in which the power of the municipalities, school boards and school leaders were strengthened. This was, surprisingly, not regarded as a radical policy measure by the Left and the education community, perhaps because the Danish school system, historically, has been decentralised anyway, as well as having a strong tradition of community schooling. In fact, the School Act finally consolidated the comprehensive school system that had been under way since 1903 by removing the remnants of tracking.

Subsequent school acts have had no implications for the structural organisation of the public school system, and therefore egalitarian education has been maintained almost unaltered until this day. Instead, legislation, which has been passed with greater frequency than before, has focussed on academic standards, school choice, national curriculum aims, and testing. In 2001, a Liberal and Conservative Coalition government took over, and immediately replaced the curriculum guidelines from 1993 with new guidelines, called ‘Clear Aims’. The new curriculum formulated aims for learning in a more standardised way, but it was still to be regarded as a guideline that teachers could follow to the extent they so wished. However, a restriction in their freedom to teach according to the ‘ethos’ of their school occurred in 2003, when ‘Clear Aims’ was replaced with a new curriculum, ‘Common Goals’. This curriculum contained compulsory national standards for academic achievement that all teachers had to comply with. In 2009, the national standards were made even more restrictive and measurable with the new curriculum, ‘Common Aims 2009’.

In 2003, it was also decided that each school should have a website that advertised their particular educational profile, and reveal their exam results. The latter requirement was regarded as a means of promoting school choice. In 2004, the Liberal-Conservative Coalition government reached an agreement with the Social Democrats and the populist right-wing party, the Danish Peoples Party, to introduce school choice across school districts and municipalities. This agreement resulted in the School Act of 2005. In 2007, school choice was subject to an evaluation carried out by the Ministry of Education. It was concluded, that for the majority of municipalities school choice has only had a relatively limited effect. In about half of the municipalities, pupils who were enrolled in a different school than the one assigned to them remained almost at the same level as prior to the School Act of 2005,

and the rest of the municipalities experienced a slight increase in the use of school choice. It was also established, that a majority of parents chose school for their children mainly on the basis of the educational approach and values of the school, rather than exam results. Only a minority of parents (15 per cent) was guided by exam results in their choice of school.⁷

National testing was launched as a pilot project in 2005 in reading, mathematics, English and physics/chemistry, and in early 2010 it was formally implemented. As part of the new testing culture, teachers were required from 2006 to write ‘pupil plans’, which contain the academic progress of the pupils seen in relation to the targets, set out in the national curriculum in all subjects.

Over the last ten years, the curriculum has changed from guidelines, in which the professional teacher could freely decide the content of the syllabus and teaching methods according to the learning styles of the pupils, to centrally controlled requirements of anticipated school results. National testing and school choice have followed suit, but it may be too early to assess fully the social impact of these policies.

According to the latest PISA study,⁸ Denmark along with Norway and Sweden, still performs relatively well in literacy, numeracy and science as well as having a relatively high level of educational equality. In terms of how much of the total variation in student performance can be attributed to students’ family backgrounds, it was established that the influence of family background on average is least pronounced in the Nordic countries and most pronounced on the Continent and the Anglo-Saxon countries. Another way educational equality is measured is how similar or dissimilar schools are to each other. Generally speaking school systems which select students by ability will show higher levels of between- school variance, but more homogenous performance levels within schools. By contrast, school systems which are non-selective and comprehensive will have lower between-school differences but more heterogeneous student performance within schools. According to the PISA study, between school variance tends to be lowest in the Nordic countries and highest on the Continent and the Anglo- Saxon countries. Within-school differences are highest in the Nordic countries, but in the comparator countries they are also quite high as well as having quite high between-school variance. The PISA study clearly demonstrates that the comprehensive school system in Denmark, as well as the other Nordic countries, contributes toward educational equality both in terms of relatively low impact of socio-economic background of the parents, as well as having rather similar schools with different pupil performance within them.

The legislative framework

The overall aims and framework for education at compulsory level is stipulated in the School Act of 2007, and in circulars issued by the Minister of Education.

According to the School Act of 2007, paragraph 1, ‘the school, in cooperation with

parents, provides pupils with knowledge and skills, preparing them for further education and gives them a desire to learn more, make them familiar with Danish culture and history, giving them understanding of other countries and cultures, contributes to the understanding of human interaction with nature and promotes the individual's all-round development' Paragraph 2 states that 'schools must develop working methods and create opportunities for experience, depth and dynamism so that students develop awareness and imagination and gain confidence in own ability and background to decide and act'. Paragraph 3 completes the aim for the school as the following: the 'school [is] to prepare pupils for participation, joint responsibility, rights and duties in a society of freedom and democracy, school work must therefore be characterized by intellectual freedom, equality and democracy'.⁹

The Schools Acts in Denmark have historically been a result of broad compromises across political parties and major interest groups such as teachers unions and parental groups. This consensus-seeking tradition in education politics has resulted in a development of the school system marked by strong continuity, rather than radical breaks with past developments. For example, the School Act of 2007 was prepared by the governing political parties, the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party, along with the Social Democrats and the small Danish People's Party. Several interest groups were consulted in the process such as the KL (Kommunernes Landsforning. Organisation of the municipalities), Børne og Kulturchefforeningen, (The Association for Children and Culture Managers), DL (Danmarks Lærerforening, The Danish Association for Teachers), Skolelederforeningen (The Association for School Principals), Skole og Forældre (School and Parents), BUPL (Association for Social Workers), Danske skolelever (Danish School Pupils). However, there is an ongoing debate about whether the consensus-seeking tradition is under threat. The current government has tended to consult fewer interested parties, and those that it does consult tend to be more inclined to its ideology that was the case in the past.

School choice in Copenhagen

Until recently, Denmark has had a long-standing tradition of community schooling. Public schools were on the whole rooted in local neighbourhoods and mirrored the social composition of the local population. School choice within the public sector was limited and the only major alternative was private education. In the 1970s, six percent of pupils were enrolled in private schools, and by the end of 1990 the figure had increased to 12 percent. During the 1990s successive governments have endorsed school choice. Today, most children are still enrolled in the school assigned to them, but parents are allowed to apply to other public schools both within and outside the municipality they have residence in. Schools are, in principle, required to accept children from other catchment areas up to their capacity limits. In 2003, about one in four pupils were enrolled in a different public school than their local school.

The social effect of school choice has been widely debated, especially in relation to major urban areas such as Copenhagen, and in relation to the immigrant population. In the last 15 years, Copenhagen has experienced a sharp increase in school children

with an immigrant background, from 16 per cent to about 30 per cent. The increasing immigration population has resulted in indigenous parents exploiting school choice to a greater extent. Even though children are assigned to specific public schools based on residence in the school catchment area, parents can apply for admission to other public schools, or about 80 private schools in Copenhagen. Parents tend to take their children out from local public schools with a high concentration of immigrant children, and enrol them instead into other public schools in which the majority of children are native Danes. Therefore, the impact on social segregation not only stems from the availability of private schooling but also comes from the freedom of choice within the public sector. Just over half of all children in Copenhagen, 52 per cent, do not attend their local public school, 26 per cent attend an alternative public school, while the remaining 26 per cent attend private schools. Native Danes start to opt out in response to rising immigrants, when the share is around 35 percent.¹⁰

Immigrant parents also make use of school choice, but there is a substantial difference in the choice made by immigrants who are monolingual (use Danish as the main language in their families) and those who are bilingual. Sixty one per cent of the bilingual immigrants attend their local public school, 27 per cent attend another public school, while only 5 percent and 6 percent attend Danish and immigrant private schools respectively. Conversely, for monolingual immigrants these self-same private schools are by far the preferred choice, with 37 and 36 per cent being enrolled in Danish and immigrant private schools respectively; another 19 percent attending their local public school, while the remaining 8 per cent are enrolled in an alternative public school. Similar to Danes, who are more likely to opt out when the percentage of immigrant children increases, immigrants who speak Danish at home show similar opting out behaviour, but the majority of immigrants who speak another language at home do not seem to respond to high numbers of immigrants in the local school.¹¹ The use of school choice, even in a country which is highly egalitarian, poses a serious threat to the school system as a vehicle for social integration. Furthermore, the provision of mother tongue instruction has been used to facilitate the integration process, but the Liberal-Conservative coalition government has removed this 'tool' of integration. In 2002, with a narrow majority, it was decided that municipalities abolished no longer need to provide mother tongue instruction. Instead, a programme for stimulating Danish for bilingual children aged 3-6 was introduced in 2004.

Private education

Private schools in Denmark have been allowed in parallel to the public provision of education, but they remain inside government control and funding. Subsidized private schools educate about 12 percent of compulsory school pupils (age 7-16). Private schools have expanded over the last few years. In the period of 2000 to 2009 the number of private schools has increased from 19.4 percent to 22.2 percent of the total number of schools, whereas the boarding schools have increased from 9.9 per cent to 11.4 per cent. At the same time, the number of public schools has fallen from 70.7 per cent to 66.3 per cent. In 2010, only two thirds of the country's schools are public schools.¹² The private schools, which tend to be smaller than the public

schools, are based on special educational, religious or political identity, and this facilitates a variety of learning styles and educational aims. They can be roughly divided into academic-oriented grammar schools, progressive free schools, religious (Catholic, Protestant, Muslim) schools, little schools, boarding schools with particular education programmes, Waldorf schools, international schools and German minority schools. The academic-oriented schools are by far the most popular school type, enrolling more than 40 percent of all private school pupils. The free schools and religious schools also enroll significant numbers of pupils.^{13 14}

The private school sector forms a heterogeneous cluster of schools with rather different historical origins. The academic-oriented grammar schools were usually old secondary technical schools that were abolished when the School Act of 1975 was passed to give way to the nine-year comprehensive school. Many of these technical secondary schools survived as private schools, now focusing on an academic curriculum. Some of these schools have boarding facilities. The Free Schools are a result of the national Romantic Movement that swept over Denmark in the mid-nineteenth century. The Danish educator, Christan Kold, a leading figure in this movement who established his own Free School in 1852, argued that alongside state-controlled education, private education based on national culture and sentiments should be established. In 1855, a Free School Act was passed that allowed parents to set up their own schools, which replaced catechism teaching with lessons in national history and literature. The remaining types of private schools were established mainly in the twentieth century, and founded on the basis of different religious persuasions and educational practices.

The Danish private schools are supported generously through a voucher scheme, and have extensive autonomy in deciding their curriculum and teaching methods as long as they provide an education that meets the quality of the public schools and maintain parental support. In principle, any interest groups, parents or religious communities can set up a private school, and receive public financial support for their operational expenditures. The government gives private schools around 75-85 percent the amount they give to public schools, and their remaining costs are covered by tuition fees. Unlike the Free Schools in Sweden, these schools are not allowed to make a profit. The private schools can impose admissions criteria if they wish; however, in practice, most private schools enroll students on a first-come, first-served basis. The voucher scheme has stimulated an already diverse private school sector, which is unparalleled in other OECD countries.¹⁵

The voucher scheme was introduced in the anticipation that private schools would encourage high attainment schools. In a recent study¹⁶ about educational attainment in private schools compared to public schools, it was concluded that, after controlling for family background and peer composition at school, the average public school pupil would attain moderately better if he or she were to be enrolled in an academic-oriented grammar school or Catholic school. However, attainment level in Protestant, International and German minority schools is no different from public schools and therefore do not yield any advantage. Free schools, boarding schools, and, in particular, little schools and Waldorf schools, have substantially lower educational

attainment at the lower stages of schooling. However, this evens out at the tertiary level, where no differences are exhibited between public and private schools. But parents choose these types of schools more for their particular education character than for their academic strength.

Endnotes

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- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 321-322.
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- ¹⁴ Wiborg, S. & Korsgaard, O. (2006) 'Grundtvig – the Key to Danish Education?' in

¹⁵ OECD, 1994, 146.

¹⁶ Rangvid, 2008.