

My Trip to Denmark – November 2016

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I have just returned from a wonderful trip to Denmark for an International Education Conference entitled 'Togetherness as Motivation - a 21st century skill?'. In addition to the day of the conference we had the privilege of visiting four educational establishments



The Headteacher telling conference participants about Ollerup Folk High School which offers facilities to young people from the age of 18 (and adults up to the age of 80+) mainly connected to sport and dance.



The start of the guided tour of The Independent Academy for free School Teaching

The conference took place at The Independent Academy for Free School Teaching. This is where students (who must be aged at least 20 or over) are trained for five years to teach in a Danish Free School. We enjoyed a tour of the Academy on the evening before the conference, guided by an extremely enthusiastic second year student teacher.



Ole Pederson opens his speech with a quote from Aristotle:

'Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all'

Ole Pederson, the head of the Academy, welcomed around 200 conference participants from over thirty different countries to the conference. He talked about the concept of 'Togetherness' as it is perceived amongst the Danish culture. Children are brought up to think 'we' rather than 'me'.

John Mason and a panel of experts discuss togetherness as motivation within education.



The conference looked at 'Motivation' in schools and if 'Togetherness' is a productive tool in helping children to achieve. Different researchers presented their findings. One aspect that came up repeatedly was the effect of peer group pressure particularly in schools where there is ingrained competitiveness (as in England). The way individual teachers deal with marks and grades also affects pupil's motivation. Comparisons were made between different countries. In England the children are continually being tested in subjects which are measureable, the results don't only affect the individual children but a teacher's ability is judged by the grades her pupils receive too. For this reason many teachers over-focus on preparing children for tests rather than developing other important life skills, and developing a love of learning for its own sake. In England this can lead to a great deal of anxiety in children leading to many mental health issues, but also increased stress levels for teachers. In Denmark the children are regularly assessed on an informal basis by teachers who know their pupils well in order to inform their teaching, but testing is kept to a minimum, and skills that cannot be easily tested (such as social skills and creativity) are deemed invaluable.

The educational establishments we visited all work on the basis of working together cooperatively rather than competitively, to consider the needs of others rather than focusing too much on the self! Social skills are deemed to be invaluable skills.

The day after the conference we visited two more educational establishments. The first visit was to Vesterskerninge Friskole, a school for students aged 6 to 16. The school employs teachers trained to work in free schools and is run by a board of parents who appoint the teachers and are responsible for making decisions about the school. There are many such free schools in Denmark. They receive 75% of their funding from the government and the parents raise the remaining 25%.



Happy children at Vesterskerninge Friskole



The school assembly was a relaxed, happy event.

Our final educational visit was to Rysling Efterskole a type of boarding school unique to Denmark. This is where students aged from 14 to 17 spend either one or two years (being paid for by their parents) to prepare them for adult life whether they choose to go on to employment or further education. Denmark has about 245 efterskoles and approximately 20% of all Danish teenagers attend one. In addition to continuing their education they are expected to clean and cook together for the benefit of their community.



Megan and Anna showed us around. They said they really love being at the efterskole.

In the eyes of many Danes, a year at an efterskole is much more than a school year. A majority come to see it as the best year of their lives. It is a 'journey of self-discovery' that both in academic and personal terms prepares young people for adult-hood. It is commonly said that 'one year at efterskole equates to seven years of human life'.

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My trip to Denmark was certainly enlightening. One of the greatest differences between English and Danish schooling is that of mutual trust and respect between pupils and teachers; the Danish teachers can stand back to aid the development and independence of a child; whereas in England in many schools the teacher is in the position of 'controller' and doesn't offer pupils the same level of trust. Human Scale Education's flagship school Stanley Park High in the London Borough of Sutton is something of an exception in English secondary schools, and when you know that the headteacher's inspiration to build a school in such a way came after a visit to Denmark, you can begin to understand why.