

Bedford-Copenhagen Learning Exchange

B4 Group Visit: 20th - 24th September 2015

Carolineskolen

We were intrigued to discover what the only Jewish school in Denmark would hold in store for us. Armed with questions, pre-conceptions to be dispelled and most importantly an optimism that the teachers we were visiting had better skills in English than we had in Danish, we eagerly attended our first day in a Danish school.

Carolineskolen has 150 pupils ranging from kindergarten (age 5) to 16. In order to gain admission to this fee paying school at least one of the children's parents must have some connection with the Jewish community.

The classes are organised in three phases, first phase, age 5 – 8, middle phase age 9 – 13 and upper phase age 14 – 16. The teaching staff remain with a group of children through a phase of the school. This helps with continuity. Different teachers teach different subjects although we discovered that the term 'head teacher' had a very different meaning in Denmark. The 'head teacher' was the member of staff who taught a class group for a large proportion of the time.

The school day begins at 8am until 1pm for the children. At 1pm the pedagogues collect, register and are responsible for children staying to the after school provision. As Carolineskolen is a private fee paying school, they have not been bound by the recent education reforms that have been adopted across Denmark. The school day has extended slightly for some children, although teaching staff have not been bound by the national expectation of remaining in school to complete planning and preparation.

One of our misconceptions was instantly dispelled. We had incorrectly assumed that all staff at the school would be required to be practising Jews. This is not the case. In fact the Principal of the school is a not a Jew (Although he is married to a Jewess).



Following a tour of the whole school we discovered that the building had originally been a sock factory. The conversion had created extremely spacious teaching, learning and multifunctional spaces. Just outside every classroom the children had access to open break out spaces. We were amazed to find groups of children accessing all areas of the building, very often without adult support and working independently. Although the building itself was somewhat dated and in need of some repair, this did not hold back any learning opportunities. The staff expressed excitement at the prospect of moving to a new building which is due to be happening within the next few years.

Something that was immediately apparent was the lack of visible displays around the school. Children's work was displayed sparsely, with very few teaching prompt displays and resources were few and far between. We saw no exercise or text books at all. In fact only the oldest children were observed writing or typing a German essay. We did observe mixed year groups working together to develop reading skills.

The relationship between staff and pupils was observed to be very trusting, close and respectful. All children addressed staff by their first names and due to the nature of the closeness of this Jewish Community; staff were often involved with families in out of school situations. Teaching and developing social skills were given a very high priority in the school. We observed children at lunchtime and in the middle phase, undertaking project work which included cooking very independently. There appeared to be no anxiety from any of the staff around the children using sharp knives, graters and gas stoves independently.

When we spoke to the Principal and asked about accountability, risk assessments and targets we were staggered to discover that the Danish education system is free from such constraints. Maybe this is what leads to the whole school having a much more relaxed atmosphere, where children, not in uniform, were trusted to be accessing learning at their own pace, level and where they felt comfortable.

We spent a great deal of time with the 'special teachers' in the school. These colleagues were responsible for meeting the educational and social needs of identified children in the school. They used a mixture of specialist intervention programmes alongside a nurturing and caring approach which ensured that the children with SEN experienced minimum levels of 'stress' and so were able to learn at a pace appropriate to their individual needs.

During our visit the whole school were undertaking an off time table themed week based around Uganda. This was centred on a link with a Jewish school in Uganda that they were supporting financially. To celebrate the end of this unit of work, Grandparents had been specifically invited during the school day to watch presentations, dances and singing from the middle phase children. The celebration also involved an African Market which was selling goods that had been made by the children as part of this study. The proceeds of which were to go to the school in Uganda after being counted by the children.

The main themes that we took from this visit to the most welcoming, yet guarded by armed police, Carolineskolen, was that regardless of language, buildings or structures; the pride, optimism and support in one's children exhibited by family members and school staff is universal.



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