

Bedford-Copenhagen Learning Exchange

B1 Group Visit: 2nd- 6th February 2014

Nørrebro Park Skole

Nørrebro Park Skole is a typical Danish school in that it takes children from aged 6 to age 16. The tradition in Denmark used to be that a teacher would take on a class when they entered the school at age 6 and remain their teacher all the way through their education. This is now becoming rarer, as the education system has seen the need for teachers to specialise more in their teaching to suit a particular age group. Therefore, the teachers at Nørrebro are largely given the choice at the end of the year as to whether they wish to move up with their current class or have a change.

The school consists of two buildings, one dating from the 19th century and one very new. The school was a surprise to us as primary teachers, as it seemed to look more like an English University from the outside than like a school. However, once we approached we discovered a play area tucked between the two buildings which at once made it feel more child centred and more familiar to us.

The space and resources available in the school were amazing. The new building particularly impressed us. It is on several storeys with a lift connecting them (for staff use only!) and security keys used on the doors and the lift. Each class has its own smaller room next door that can be used for small groups or individual children to work alone. There was a designated music room and other rooms fitted out for specific purposes. There was even a climbing wall in one room! This would seem to be where younger children can benefit from being in the same school as older children. These resources seemed to be what might be found in an English middle or upper school but not usually available at primary level. The environment did seem quite stark in comparison with English schools but this actually gave the rooms, and the school as a whole, a calmer feel. Through discussion with the Danish teachers, they liked our displays when they visited us earlier in the year, and have begun to replicate some of that in Nørrebro School. However, as English teachers, we began to question whether the multitude of displays covering our walls in England is always a benefit. Could it be that we over stimulate the children to the point where the walls are just a colourful noise that they can't take in? Something for us to think about?

We were invited to watch several lessons during our two day visit. The teaching style seemed similar in each lesson and was very teacher-led. The teachers seem to have a great deal of autonomy over what they teach and there seemed little evidence of planning and little or no differentiation. However, all the children were engaged in the lesson and behaviour was very good. There seems to be a very calm ethos permeating the whole school. Teaching in Denmark focuses on the academic subjects and after Grade 6 (age 12) these subjects comprise the whole curriculum. It was very interesting to see an English lesson where the children are taught English but are also taught the culture and social history of major English speaking countries. The lesson we saw was based around American civil rights and Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' speech and showed a good level of English being spoken by the 16 year olds involved.

We were fascinated to see the 'Reception' Class – which in Copenhagen means the class receiving children who have arrived from other countries. When they first arrive, they stay in this Reception class until they can speak some Danish. This seemed strange to us, coming from an area with many immigrant children in our schools who mix straight away with their English speaking peers. However, the theory behind it is that it is a safe place where they can build confidence before mixing fully with the other children. It was a very nurturing atmosphere in the classroom and did seem to work well.

What was very apparent in the school was that the teachers are completely independent in teaching and managing their own class. There seemed to be no collaborative planning and no very structured programme to follow. It may just be that we did not see this during our visit. The teachers are not observed by the head teacher and never judged or graded on their lessons. This was interesting as it seemed to create a very relaxed happy work place but it did also raise the question for us about how they then improve their teaching. If no one ever sees what you do or gives you feedback on how to improve, will you develop as a teacher?

We felt that throughout our visit to various Danish schools, we saw many ways in which children are supported to stay in school and continue their education. Nørrebro Park employs two social workers part-time to work within the school to help children with educational and personal issues. There are two types of social worker in Copenhagen. One type are social workers as we know them in England, who deal with serious abuse issues. Those employed by the schools are more like school guidance counsellors. Children can ask to see them privately, up to three times, to discuss any issues they have, without any need for parental consent. If they then ask for a fourth session, the social worker is obliged to let the parents know. The child might be referred to the social worker by their class teacher, in which case parental permission is needed before they can speak to the child. It seems that currently parents do not seek their help very often but this is a relationship the social workers are keen to build up. These counsellor social workers sometimes visit the home, usually with the class teacher as it is very much a team approach. It seemed such a wonderful resource, to have two people who were there solely to look after the pastoral care of the children.

The overall feeling we got from the school was one of complete trust. It seemed that the calm ethos was built on mutual trust between all groups involved in the school. The teachers seemed to have a greater trust of their children, as we saw many individuals or small groups working in break-out rooms unsupervised. There is obviously a greater trust from parents for the teachers looking after their children, not just in this school but across Denmark. If you want to take your class out for the day, there is no such thing as a Risk Assessment of parent permission slips! The head teacher and senior staff have a great deal of trust in their teachers doing a good job and don't feel the need to watch over them, although we did discuss with them that in England observations can be of great benefit if used well. We saw more evidence of trust when the head teacher showed us around the grounds. The schools in Denmark have no boundary demarcation with fencing or walls. Anyone is free to come onto the site. Due to this, the school does have a situation where homeless people, often immigrants, will come and camp out in the school's covered doorways at night. Rather than seeing this as a problem and taking negative action, the head teacher has used it positively and has made a verbal agreement with them that they will turn a blind eye to the homeless sleeping there if the homeless in return keep an eye on the site overnight. What a great way to show trust. It is a situation we could not quite see happening in England!

We felt very grateful to the staff of Nørrebro Park for welcoming us into their school. We saw many thought provoking ideas and are keen to try out some of these in our own school. We have set up a link with the staff from the school so we can mutually benefit from discussing and improving our teaching across both schools. In June we are looking forward to a week's visit from two Nørrebro staff, who will come and teach in our school. We will then reciprocate in July, with two of our staff going to work in Copenhagen for a week. We can't wait!

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