



## Country Background Report Denmark

### 1. Background – everyday reality versus political framework?

The everyday practice of school leaders is very complex. Not only because being a leader of 50-100 teachers and other categories of staff and 400-900 students is a complex challenge in itself, but also because the situation is under constant transformation with new challenges, demands and expectations from the outer world of the school as well as the inner world.

The traditional Danish 'Folkeskole' (primary and lower secondary school with students age 6-16 years) was built on the vision of a 'Democratic Education' meaning the task of establishing schooling that took care of the comprehensive formation and learning of children in order that they were being educated so they could be active citizens, family members, participants in cultural and political life and in working life. This vision or discourse is being contested by a discourse of effectiveness: Schools must help children acquire basic skills like literacy and numeracy. The shift is often referred to as the shift from 'education for life' towards 'education for tests'. This makes it difficult for school leaders to lead consistently.

Accompanying the shift in discourses and governance are new relations between schools and local and national authorities. As the ministry and the local authorities are pressing the schools and changing the expectations in the direction of accountability towards administrative authorities and rationality, there is a trend to make the school leader the person responsible and accountable. So there is a pressure for more loyalty upwards.

Another challenge is the new composition of the Danish population, that can best be seen in bigger cities with many immigrants and with a growing divide between well-off parents and poor parents. Thus students from many different backgrounds attend the school and that poses challenges for the school. At the same time there is a political move towards expecting schools to be more inclusive and thus not exclude students for any reason. This mix of conditions and expectations is felt in many places to be difficult.

This tendency is occurring simultaneously with the general, cultural tendency that adults as well as children are changing their attitudes towards authorities and knowledge leaving teachers and therefore also school leaders in a new situation that needs to be approached in new ways.

### 2. National and local contexts

The 20th century Danish comprehensive school evolved out of the development of the Danish welfare state (a largely social-democratic project) and a consensus-building dialogue across political parties. The school was, as mentioned above, looked upon as a vehicle for promoting equal opportunities and as a place for acquiring knowledge, skills, and values that prepare the student for life in a broader sense. That was done with reference to the concept and vision of 'Democratic Education', traditional egalitarian and nation-building school ideas and inclusive welfare thinking.

Since the beginning of the 1990s and with renewed pace from 2001, the Danish comprehensive educational system has been undergoing a process of thorough transformation under the influence of strong international currents. As an effect of trans-national comparisons (like PISA & TIMMS) and of trans-national reviews (like the OECD annual 'School at a Glance') the Danish Government, like many other governments, have chosen to interpret and transmit the homogenizing trends into national legislation, national discourses (like a shift from 'Bildung' [cultural education] towards 'back to basics') and national social technologies (like testing and contracts). The strong currents underlying the trends are neo-liberal politics and rationality that have linked educational thinking very closely to the economy and to neo-conservative trends of back-to-basics; more subject-oriented teaching, re-introduction of testing at all levels of primary school and also of other social technologies. The meaning of the words 'leadership', 'professional', and 'learning'

are thus going through a process of profound change.

We have seen a double move, on the one hand strong decentralisations and, on the other, strong re-centralisations. An example of decentralisation is that the responsibility for finances and the day-to-day administration of the 'Folkeskole' was in 1992 devolved to municipalities – i.e. the school districts) and from there to schools. The form of governance was called governing by 'frames and block grants.'

The school head now manages very large parts of the budget in collaboration with School Boards. Each school has its school board, which has a parental majority membership.

The second trend, the re-centralisation is visible in that the Acts of the 'Folkeskole', and therefore the responsibility for curriculum and objectives of the schools, remain in the hands of Parliament/the Ministry of Education while parts of the interpretations and administration of the curriculum were given to municipalities and to schools themselves while the national goals are described in a more detailed by the Ministry and the accountability is also in the hands of the Ministry (the national tests, the Quality Report etc.).

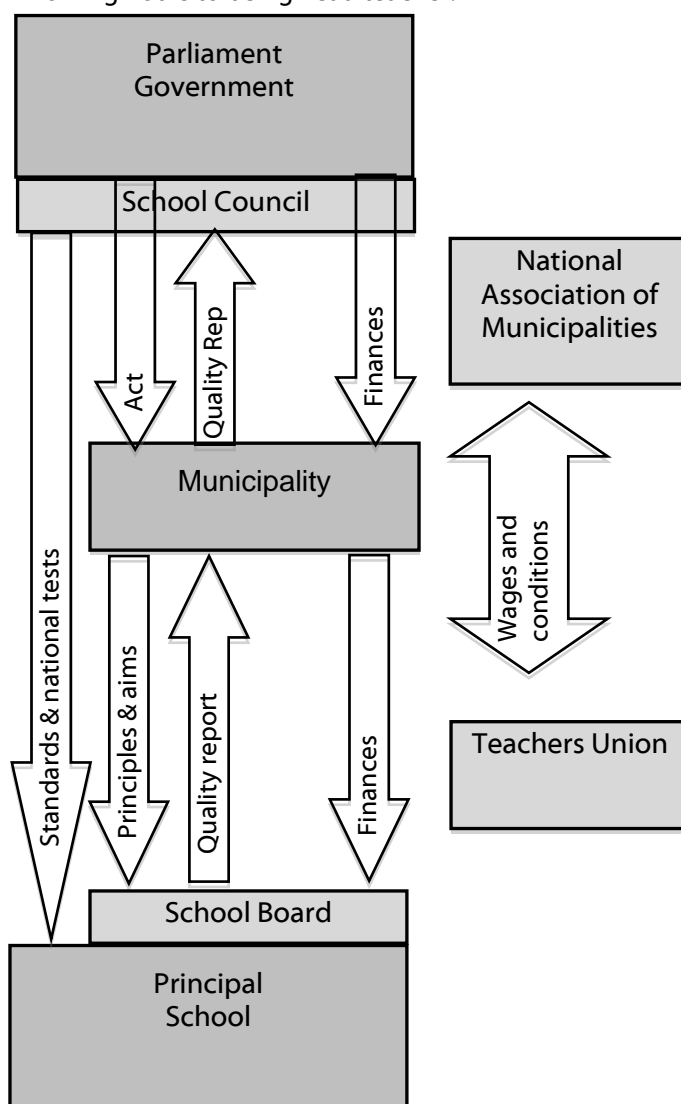
We thus see a new mix of 'hard' and 'soft governance,' of governing by regulations and governing by persuasion and guiding.

Two very important players in the educational system are the Teachers' Union and the National Association of Municipalities. The terms of service and wages are negotiated by those parties at the national level. At the municipal level the Teachers' Union representatives negotiate with the local school authority. Those two parties are also important stakeholders in policy making and implementation as the government almost always invite them to consultations before legislation or national regulations are developed.

### 3. School Leadership concepts and practices

#### Conceptual framework

The principal in the 'Folkeskole' has no teaching responsibilities, but can devote all of her/his working hours to being head teacher.



For a decade or two there has been a political wish to make school leaders strong decision makers and visible leaders in the everyday life of the school as well as in the vision and strategic work of the school. Traditionally they were more like a colleague to the teachers, 'primus inter pares,' in a flat, democratic school structure. As the structure is being made more hierarchical, there seems to be a need for stronger leadership. On the other hand, most school principals experience in their daily work that the way actions and changes are done in schools is best per-

formed through open and fair decision making, continuous discourse and negotiations with staff. In most Danish schools we thus see that leadership is distributed in numerous ways (see also item 3.c).

### **Focus on teaching and learning**

School principals are focusing on teaching and learning in many ways. One way is to make sure that teachers know of and understand the demands from the outside, from the Ministry, from local authorities and from parents. This is the case with the changing discourses and with the new social technologies, like the contracts the school must make with the local authorities and the new, national goals and the accountability system, the tests.

Here many school leaders find that this situation creates many dilemmas for them, because the focus on the accountability system and the focus on national goals that is seen in effective schooling ideas endangers the creativity and authenticity of teacher-student relations as well as the broader scope of a 'Democratic Education.' It can too easily make teachers 'teach for the test' and thus be subject to the axiom that 'you get what you measure – and only that.'

So school leaders struggle with the challenge and invent new ways of relating to and leading teachers. This is aimed at giving them support as well, challenging them and focusing on the external demands placed on them. They must also take into account the need for comprehensive education and the care of students.

### **Restructuring and re-culturing school organisation**

Most schools distribute leadership to teachers leaving them to lead themselves in accordance with agreed on values, norms and procedures. This is seen in several ways: Most schools have formed leadership teams with the school leader, the deputy leader, department leaders and sometimes administrative leaders who agree on who does what in respect of administration, strategies and pedagogical leadership. The school leader is also very often the outward messenger and negotiator of the school.

In many schools teachers work in teacher teams. Some of them are formally named 'self-steering

teams' which means that they can take over leadership of a number of functions: They can be the resources for special needs education, the day-to-day and annual planning of instruction, the administration of substitute teachers. In the teams much of the educational planning and internal evaluation is carried out.

Of course there is distribution of leadership to individual teachers, when they plan for, carry through and evaluate their own teaching duties in classes within the frames and demands set from the outside.

Leaders lead the teams in setting the agenda for professional discussions, how they set the stage for relations and practices and how they govern through the use of social technologies, like annual teacher plans (a kind of contract), team meetings with school the leadership and through leaders meeting individual teachers in order to evaluate their practice and set new goals for the next year.

### **Setting and negotiating the direction**

The first priority of a school leader is to set priorities for the school's work. She/he therefore must be aware of the expectations of the 'school owners,' the Parliament, the Ministry, the Municipal Council and Local Authorities, the School Board, the Parents and the local community. The stakeholders have many and often conflicting expectations, so the school leader has to find good compromises and negotiate them with staff.

As has been mentioned above, the expectations of the national and local authorities have increased considerably over the past two decades accompanied by tighter accountability, so the school's room to manoeuvre has decreased. The room for leadership has also decreased – except for the finances and the day-to-day administration. This makes it more appropriate to call the school leader a translator of detailed, external expectations into internal direction.

In order to raise the motivation and commitment of staff, many school leaders are looking at new demands to find if there are aspects of the educational practice that can be re-named to fit into the new images.

### Systems Leadership and networks

School leaders co-operate with many external partners in different ways. One kind of cooperation is what we will call systems leadership. School leaders cooperate with agents and agencies from outside the educational sector like social authorities, pedagogical-psychological experts and agencies, health care agencies, dental care agencies, leisure time institutions etc. The co-operation is often formalized and continuous and sometimes ad hoc. It is on a one-child basis or it is on whole school basis. School leaders find that it is necessary to seek help and assistance when problems outside the educational expertise of the school occur.

Another kind of co-operation with external partners is called leader networks. In many municipalities leaders communicate and meet with other school leaders from the same municipality on a regular basis. These networks work as learning forums or knowledge sharing fora for school leaders. Sometimes the network invites external consultants to facilitate the collaboration, but very often they work on their own.

### Example of good practice

The continuous education of school leaders is generally a local responsibility: The municipalities, who are named the school owners, must establish and finance education and training of leaders. In some cases they encourage and pay their leaders to take part in one or more modules of a Diploma Programme in Public Leadership at the University Colleges and in some rare cases they finance participation in a Master's Programme in Educational Leadership.

But in most cases continuous education is seen as part of day-to-day practice in the municipalities so they often build on establishing networks. In a municipality with 24 schools three kinds of networks were formed:

- The municipality was divided into 12 districts and networks of leaders from schools and social institutions were formed. They were to collaborate on local issues and thus meet every other month.

- Ad hoc school leadership networks that could take care of ad hoc tasks, e.g. given by the school authorities
- Developmental networks. School leaders from 5-6 schools meet on a regular basis to share knowledge and experiences. They are given the assistance of an external convenor to further the learning processes.

The intentions were to have school leaders meet, discuss and share in diverse forums because the tasks were different. Working on broader issues with other institutions, working on issues, given to them by the authorities and working on continuous education for themselves.

All forms of networks were well known and many school leaders had experienced working in them, but now the tasks were differentiated in order to obtain a better quality of the meetings in the networks.

## 4. Re-culturing and educating school leaders

### Recruitment and retention of leaders

It is not yet a precondition for teachers, who apply for a principalship, to be formally educated in leadership, but it is coming. Traditionally there used to be a track from teacher to shop steward to municipal representative for the teacher union to leadership post. This used to be the normal track to leadership. But for a decade or so this has been changed as many teachers participate in leadership training courses and they are preferred when local authorities or school boards employ new department leaders, deputies or school leaders. Often teachers start a leadership career being employed as a middle leader – department leader – in a school for a few years before they apply for deputy or leader posts.

Many school leaders are aware of the situation so they are actively encouraging potential leaders to engage in a leadership track. They give them smaller leadership tasks or encourage them to get educated in leadership. School leaders are looking for teachers with good communication competencies, with a good overview of the whole school and its context, with good problem solving capacities and good educational and class leadership competencies, because those

competencies seem to be the foundations for leaders.

The formal authority to employ leaders lies with the municipal council and municipal authorities, but very often they have distributed this task to school boards and school leaders.

For a number of years it has been difficult to have sufficient numbers of sufficiently qualified applicants for leadership post and it is also difficult to have leaders stay in their posts. Often they want to go back to teaching or find jobs outside the educational sector.

### Attractiveness

Most school leaders say that the main reason for them applying for leadership posts is that they want to make a difference to the whole school and to students' and teachers' learning. It is not that they think they get a job with high status in society, because generally being a teacher or school leader does not necessarily mean high social status. All public employees have lost status over the past two to three decades for many reasons. One is the general trend that knowledge is contested and very widespread, so knowledge workers lose status to other groups in society like communication industry workers. Another important reason is the neo-liberal political trend. From the 1980'ies neo-liberal political parties have worked to cut the public sector down and thus have talked of the imperfect and superfluous public sector.

The school leadership work situation – as has been described above – could also be seen as less attractive, because this is the centre of many daily conflicts and dilemmas.

It is difficult to find out how much salary matters for job satisfaction. When asked, only very, very few school leaders point to this factor. But we cannot know if this is because it is not important or if leaders find that this is out of style to mention it. In Denmark teachers earn an average of €3.500 pr. month plus 18% pension and a school leader earns €5.400 pr. month also plus pension. The difference could be an incentive for teachers.

### National structure for education

For two decades most newly appointed and acting school leaders have attended a three-week

course in leadership over two years at 'The Local Government Training and Development, Denmark (LGTD). This is the Danish municipalities' and regions' nationwide organization for training and development and it is closely related to the National Association of Municipalities. This course was voluntary and not state run.

For one decade school leaders or middle leaders have been able to attend a two-year part-time Diploma Course (60 ECTS) in general, public leadership at one of the University Colleges. This course used to be voluntary but is soon going to be seen as a precondition for applying for school leadership posts.

In some municipalities, the bigger ones, there have been shorter courses or seminars for school leaders. They very often focused on new trends and demands on schools. A number of municipalities have combined the Diploma Course with a mentoring system in order to encourage teachers to attend a course prior to them taking on leadership roles. School leaders functioned as mentors for their teachers and attended parts of the course with them.

### Coaching

As mentioned above school leaders collaborate in networks with peers in order to produce better overviews and reflections on leadership practice. Some municipalities find funding for coaches for school leaders or for school leader networks, but it seems to be only a few.

The Quality Report is intended to be a means of communication and dialogue between schools and local authorities. It is intended to function as a platform for talks between municipal leaders and school leaders in ways similar to the annual Development Plans that many municipalities asked their schools to produce prior to the Quality Report Act. The report must be made public – except for the results of individual students and classes. It remains to be seen how the Quality Report will function as it has only been in place for one year. The experiences from the Development Plans are however not promising, as not very many local authorities found the time to talk with school leaders. It also remains to be seen if the report will be used as a means for parents' comparison of schools.

## 5. Challenges, areas of innovation and underlying evidence

The most important dilemma for school leaders is how to manoeuvre between different and often contradicting discourses of schooling. On the one hand they need to lead their schools in accordance with the expectations of the legal stakeholders and on the other in line with professional values.

Accompanying the shift in discourses and governance are new relations between schools and local and national authorities. As the ministry and the local authorities are pressing the schools and changing the expectations in the direction of accountability towards administrative authorities and rationalities, there is a trend to make the school leader the person responsible and accountable. So there is a pressure for more loyalty upwards.

Another challenge is the new composition of the Danish population that can best be seen in bigger cities with relatively many immigrants and with a growing divide between well-off parents and poor parents. Thus students with different backgrounds meet in schools and that poses challenges for teaching. At the same time there is a political move towards expecting of schools to be more inclusive and thus not exclude students for any reason. This mix of conditions and expectations is felt in many places to be difficult.

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well as challenging them and focusing on the external demands as well as on the comprehensive education and the care of students.

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In order to raise the motivation and commitment of staff many school leaders are looking at new demands to find if there are aspects of the educational practice that can be re-named to fit into the new images.

It is difficult to recruit school leaders. Many school leaders are aware of the situation so they are actively encouraging potential leaders to engage in a leadership track. They give them smaller leadership tasks or encourage them to get educated in leadership. School leaders are looking for teachers with good communication competencies, with a good overview of the whole school and its context, with good problem solving capacities and good educational and class leadership competencies, because those competencies seem to be the foundations for leaders.

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## Appendix

### Hiring and firing of school leaders

Schools are governed by the municipalities, the city council and its local authority – school superintendent and his/her secretariat. Principals are employed by the city council on the background of a nomination from the school board of each school. A nominating committee is formed with parents' and teachers' representatives. The nominations of the nominating committee are taken very seriously in most cases, but at the end of the day it is the political leadership of the city council who decides. This procedure is the same when it

comes to hiring and firing of teachers, but informally many city councils and local administrations have decentralized the decisions in regard to teacher employment and firing being given to schools (school board and principal).

As an illustration of the ways principals are recruited and thereby of the ways authorities think of the work of principals, there follows a translation of an advertisement for a principal that was put – as most of them are – in the teachers' union journal.

#### **Varde Municipality** – *The municipality with old traditions and new visions*

##### **School Leader (contract holder) for the Bronson School**

A position as school leader is vacant at the Bronson School as the present principal has chosen to retire.

There are 600 wonderful children with committed parents and 50 skilled teachers in the school. Teachers collaborate with each other and with the school leadership. There is a well-functioning leisure time institution integrated in the school with 200 children and 25 employees. The staff collaborates closely with teachers. The technical-administrative staff functions well.

Bronson School is situated in the Northern parts of Varde Town with fine areas. It is an inclusive school with many newly renovated facilities. Amongst them the best school starting department in the whole of Western Jutland. The school has made great progress in collaborating with kindergartens around the school start and is on the way to forming self-steering teams.

The school has got a contract with the City Council with a financial frame of 24 million DKK (equals € 3.2 million).

We are looking for a school leader who:

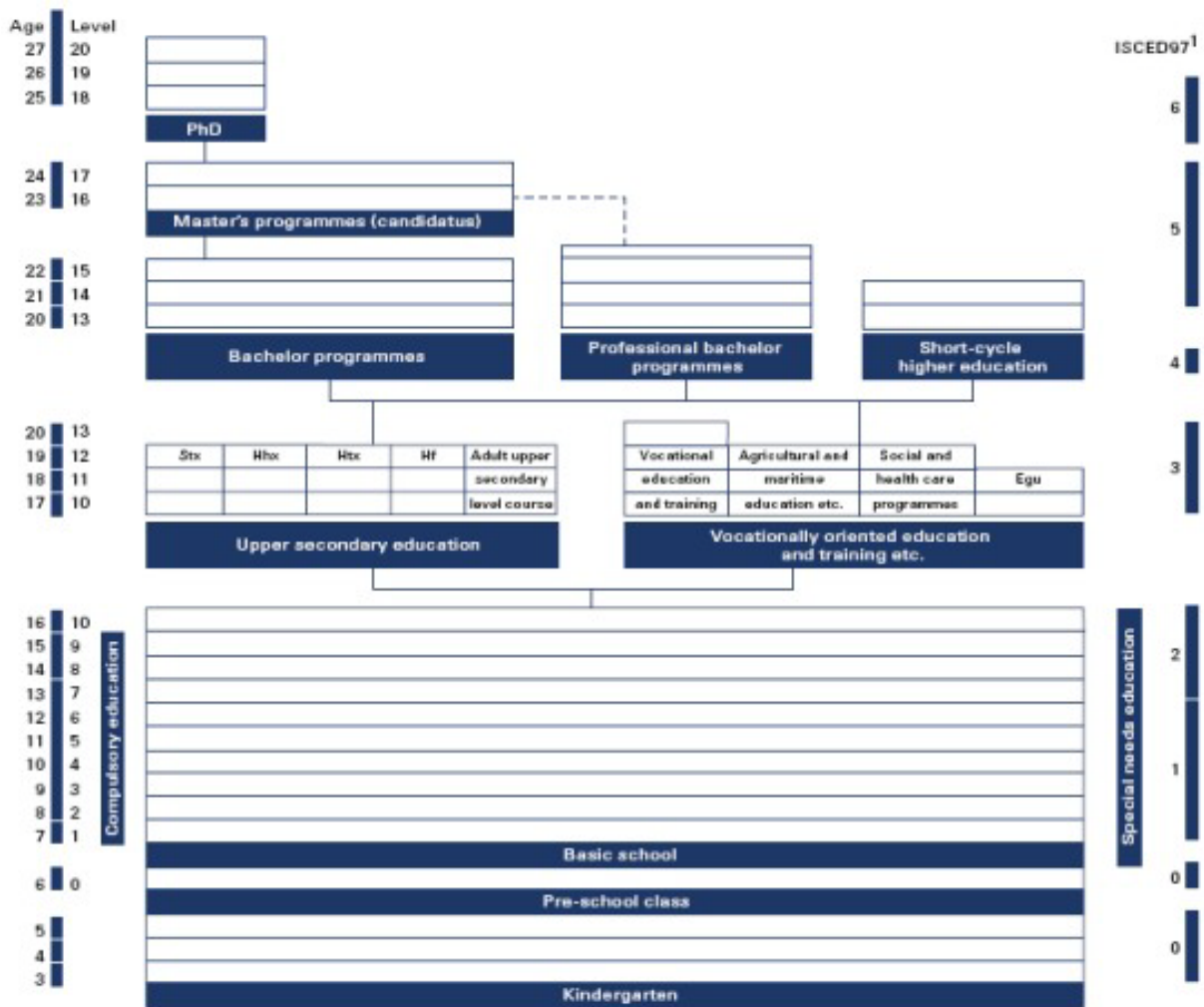
- Has good educational and leadership knowledge and experience,
- Can collaborate with the rest of the leadership team on the daily work and on the development of the leadership team...

The advertisement demonstrates the scope in school leadership. On the one hand, there is a need to have a competent leader, who knows about education, leadership and collaboration. On the other hand, he/she must be a competent financial manager, who is able to manage a big contract.

## Legal Situation

("Consolidation Act no. 170 of 2. June 2006", Act on Folkeskole 2006) - Consolidation Act no. 170 of 2nd June 2006, Ministry of Education (Act on the Folkeskole 2006).

## The Danish Education System



Note 1: International Standard Classification of education.



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