

A young child with light brown hair is sitting on a log in a forest. The child is wearing a blue denim vest over a dark blue hoodie with a red interior lining. The child is looking slightly to the left with a neutral expression. The background is filled with fallen autumn leaves in shades of orange, yellow, and brown. A white rectangular box with a light blue drop shadow is positioned in the upper right quadrant of the image, containing the word "Denmark".

Denmark



# The School for Life

Claes Solborg Pedersen

## Abstract

This chapter on social and emotional education (SEE) in Denmark offers a unique insight into the history and present day realities of what it is like to attend school in Denmark. Claes Solborg Pedersen takes us by the hand and introduces us firstly to Ved Vejen (By the Road) an integrated nursery (for children from 1 – 3 years old) and a kindergarten (for children from 3 – 6 years old). One of the core philosophies of this day-care institution is total respect for the children. As the principal, Mie Christensen, says: “staff must quite simply behave themselves well with the children – there are very few rules to obey”. As the school’s practice and learning document states: “The responsibility for good relations always rests with the adults.”

Secondly, Claes takes us to a Forest Kindergarten just outside Copenhagen. Forest kindergartens are widespread in Scandinavia and Germany and place an emphasis on the children spending much of their time in nature enjoying free play. *“Today there is an excursion to the forest. The children know the rules: They are allowed to go by themselves, but must always wait for the adult at selected points along the path: The overturned tree, the red marker, the House of the Witch ... Characteristically everything takes place in a pleasant slow-motion, there is no rush at all.”* The district schools which the children attend after the Forest kindergarten report that the children who have attended the Forest kindergarten have much better social competence than others.

The other two case studies focus on a special school and a new type of school called the New Nordic School. The case studies in this chapter were chosen for their exemplary ways of dealing with social and emotional education. Examples of dialogue between pedagogues and children focus on the many aspects of relational competence, and reflect the deep respect held by the teachers for the children and their parents.

Where do we find the seeds of this emphasis on school as a community where relationships are valued? If we look back we find that in 1814 Denmark established one of the world’s first compulsory public school systems known as Folkeskolen, the people’s school, which developed into one of the pillars of democratic society and a forerunner of the Danish welfare state.

Denmark can still boast of schools and day-care institutions which have high democratic ideals and an intention to minimize the impact of social background. Lately, however, as the welfare state seems to be undergoing a slow transformation into a competitive state, the focus of the educational system is changing from goal-orientation to result-orientation.

For almost two centuries the Danish educational system has aimed at achieving both academic and educational excellence. This dual concept was introduced in 1816 by N.F.S. Grundtvig’s *School for Life* and his understanding of the importance of emotional education. It has always been the ideal of the Danish school tradition that “it only makes sense for a man to learn to

become a man, if he is also educated to develop himself within the existing social context". Social and emotional education has long been considered a prerequisite for improving academic competences. Relational competence is one of the three main subjects taught to teacher trainees along with didactics and classroom management.

In Denmark there are no compulsory programmes for the development of social and emotional competences. The overall opinion seems to be that SEE should permeate relationships between teachers and students at all levels. Through the case studies in this chapter one gets the sense of how, in spite of the current government's focus on quantitative academic results, social and emotional education continues to be an important part of Danish school culture.

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He is also a family therapist, educated at the former Kempler Institute of Scandinavia, founded by Jesper Juul. His professional work, both as a teacher, headmaster and later as an independent counsellor has focused on implementing Juul's concept of "relational competence", with a strong focus on the inclusion of the families of the children. At the Kempler Institute he has taught postgraduate courses for teachers, department heads and directors of schools and social institutions. As an independent psychologist he now counsels families and supervises both pedagogues, teachers, and directors of various institutions in the educational and social field. His work is focused on the relationship between theory and practice, and how to promote equal dignity between children, parents and professional educators.

He is an external lecturer at University College Capital in Copenhagen, where he teaches postgraduate courses in psychology and special education. He is a member of the Brussels-based NGO the "Alliance for Childhood" which aims to improve conditions of childhood by organizing lectures for members of the European Parliament.

He is very inspired by and grateful to his family - his Argentinian born wife, two children and three grandchildren.

### **A History of Education in Denmark**

In 1814 Denmark was the second country in the world (after Prussia) to introduce compulsory education for all children between the ages of 7 and 14. The year before, in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, the country went bankrupt and lost Norway to Sweden, and many efforts were focused on territorial and identity issues: "What is outwardly lost must be inwardly gained." This was accentuated in 1864, when Denmark lost the duchies of Schleswig, Holstein and Lauenburg to Prussia after a disastrous war. Nationalism was at the top of the agenda.

Until 1814 schools were not for people in general. The bigger cities had "Latin Schools" which taught Latin, Greek, and religion; rote learning was the main method, and ironically

schools. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century a gradual change was brought about through the growing awareness of the importance of the mother-tongue. In order to understand your own life, school must meet you not only in the Danish language but also in the telling of stories that pertain to your own life, thus making it possible to recognize yourself, not only as someone else's subject but as a human being in your own right. This important shift in education was the forerunner of the change which occurred in Denmark from absolute monarchy to democracy in 1849.

The 1814 school Act was originally defined by the following values: the goals for academic achievement of the Christian Evangelic Protestant Church, but also the need for school to inculcate knowledge and skills

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## **In order to understand your own life, school must meet you not only in the Danish language but also in the telling of stories that pertain to your own life ...**

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enough even the teaching of Latin was of a very poor quality – and all this in a country with two other official languages, Danish and German! It was obvious that the Latin Schools were intended mainly to prepare students for the clergy.

People were not considered people in their own right, but merely thought of as the King' or the landowner's subjects. Children were subordinated by brutal discipline and a very insistent emphasis on Christianity: Luther's catechism had to be learned by heart. This also applied to children of commoners in the countryside, where village schools existed from 1719. One can imagine how far from these children's reality school must have seemed. Children were beaten both at home and in the

that are necessary for children to become useful citizens of the nation-state. The vision for the first national school Act was thus two-fold.

### **Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig**

This dual approach was inspired by N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783-1872) who was a priest, educator, poet, hymn-writer and philosopher. Mention should be made that he is known internationally for his adult education project for commoners / young adults in the countryside, called "Folk High Schools" or "People's High Schools", although this is beyond the scope of this chapter. The European Union has named its adult education project "The Grundtvig Programme" in honour of his work.

Grundtvig realized the necessity of a school that included common people – and that the language of instruction needed to change from Latin to Danish. He eventually became a member of the constitutional assembly which created the 1849 Constitution to replace the rule of absolute monarchy. It was no revolution in the ordinary sense, but a strong awakening of the people which the king wisely decided not to oppose. The peasants joined forces to create a large cooperative movement, and the hierarchical structures of former times were challenged at all levels. With regard to the educational system Grundtvig showed considerable courage when questioning traditions:

*If democracy is to be introduced into Denmark, it must be firmly and broadly anchored in the people. And this requires popular education*  
(Korsgaard 2011, p 18)

Grundtvig is famous for his concept “The School for Life”. Since 1920 the motto of the Danish Teachers’ Union has been “We learn for life”.

*The school for Death we know all too well, unfortunately, and not just those of us who attended it. It is a school that takes pride in resting on ‘dead languages’ and confesses that grammatical infallibility and lexical perfection are the ideal goal that the school endeavours to achieve at the expense and sacrifice of life!*  
(Grundtvig 1838)

Instead Grundtvig pleads for a school for life; in an article “On the Philosophical Century” (1816) he very clearly defines what emotional education is all about:

Truly to understand oneself is the great goal of human reason, the apex of hu-

man education.  
(Korsgaard 2011, p 21)

Although the issue of social/emotional education is losing momentum in current educational debate, this perspective has been upheld by scholars and philosophers ever since. An example of this is the Danish philosopher K.E. Løgstrup’s reflection on the purpose and nature of schools:

*The purpose of the school is to teach life skills. We must insist that the purpose of school is education, so that our society’s character of a working society does not lead us to reducing the purpose of school to solely increasing subject knowledge and academic competence. Studying a subject is a derivative of learning about life.*  
(Løgstrup 1981)

This quotation illustrates the core conflict in educational policy in Denmark which has existed for many decades with regard to the “Folkeskole” (the Danish term for municipal schools including primary and lower secondary, see below). The goals stated in the 1814 act were sufficiently sustainable to last 123 years before the first revision, and the dual aspect of social and emotional education and academic competence was upheld in later revisions. The purpose of the Folkeskole is to develop children’s talents and capabilities, to strengthen their character and provide them with useful knowledge. At the beginning of the 1960s reform pedagogy demanded that formal training be replaced by a more functional type of learning, creating more meaningful situations for the children: More cooperative learning, cross-curricular activities, and an increased criticism of tests and grading took place. School was no longer focused merely on learning facts, but rather on learning how to learn, and how to live among other children, and to take into consideration the welfare of others.

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## “The purpose of the school is to teach life skills.” (Løgstrup 1981)

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As a young teacher in 1973 I found the reformed school a very inspiring place to work. Many new schools were built in order to adapt the learning environment to the new reforms, open-plan schools and more spaces for group work found their way into the school buildings. Teachers still commanded respect and were listened to by the authorities. I taught at an open-plan school where the staff decided to oppose the old style separation of grades 5 – 9 into two streams (a lower and a higher level) in subjects such as Danish and mathematics. This was against the law, but similar thinking in other schools and backing by the local council eventually led to the abolishment at a national level of the practice of splitting classes into two streams. Those were the days when things worked from the “bottom-up”, when teachers actively influenced law-making, in strong contrast to today’s “top-down” legislation.

During the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a gradual centralisation took place, and at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century PISA scores cast their shadow over the pedagogical landscape. Denmark was placed in the middle of the field, obtaining low to average scores as opposed to the government’s visions of a “World Champion School”. The cognitive approach to education gained ground. The global economic crisis led to increased focus on the country’s ability to compete internationally and the 2006 School Act, while retaining social and emotional goals, clearly gave priority to preparing the students for further education. The political debate shifted with demands for more control over education and evidence of academic success, and a number of national tests were introduced as a result. In 2003 the prime minister questioned what he called “cir-

cle pedagogy”, in which, according to him, everybody took part in debate circles in order to address the question ‘What do you think yourself?’ instead of learning specific academic skills. Teachers’ status dropped to the point where the teachers themselves were blamed for the poor PISA-scores. In 2004 increased academic competence was also called for through clearly-defined learning goals for each year, and more internet-based national testing. Although such tests cannot measure the acquisition of life skills politicians still grapple with the dual role of the Folkeskole in public debates.

### The 2014 School Reform

In August 2014 the latest school reform was introduced. School days are now longer, and integrated physical, creative, and practical activities run by pre-school and school teachers now form part of the curriculum. In addition to passing the new Act without establishing a dialogue with the teachers’ union, new work rules were forced upon the teachers by a lock-out followed by parliamentary legislation. This removed the last shreds of respect for the profession, and in my experience many teachers feel deeply hurt and very reluctant to assume ownership for the new reforms. Most unusually the preliminary description of the expected practice did not build on a formulated goal. Instead the focus is on meeting operational, quantitative measurements that include the following:

- at least 80% of the students must perform well in Danish and Mathematics as measured by national tests
- the share of students in Danish and Mathematics with the highest grade must increase year by year

- The share of students with poor national test results shall be reduced from one year to the next
- the well-being of the students must increase.  
(Folkeskolen no. 21, June 2013)

In other words it seems that goal-orientation is being replaced by result-orientation. Although in my opinion the metrics listed above will create a much more one-dimensional school, the original objectives still remain in place, outlining the specific contexts in which education is to take place:

- the Folkeskole is to provide the pupils with knowledge and skills in cooperation with the parents
- prepare them for further education and instill a desire for further learning
- make them feel at home with Danish culture and history
- facilitate an understanding of other countries and cultures
- add to their understanding of the interaction between man and nature
- and promote the rounded development of the individual child  
(Undervisningsministeriet, Act 593 of June 24, 2009)

A positive feature of the forthcoming school reform is the fact that much of the implementation will be left to municipal councils, directors and to the teachers themselves, who will necessarily become those responsible for the new reform. From my experience as a director of a special school catering for children with psycho-social problems, I am particularly optimistic about the fact that preschool teachers will become a more integrated part of our schools.

### An Overview of the Danish School System

The Danish Folkeskole is a comprehensive school covering both primary and lower sec-

ondary education, i.e. first stage (grades 0-6, for ages 6-12) and second stage (grades 7-9/10, for ages 13-17) basic education. In other words the Folkeskole caters for 6/7-16/17 year olds. By law all children must attend grades 0-9 (grade 0 is also known as kindergarten). Grade 10 is voluntary; and the transition to upper secondary education may take place after the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade (ages 16 or 17).

Upper secondary schools called "Gymnasium" (grades 10-12) are run by regional authorities and cater for 16-19 year olds. In addition to the "general high school" (stx) branches such as commercial (hbx) and technical high schools (htx) are introduced at this level. Instead of the Gymnasium it is possible to go from the Folkeskole's grade 10 to vocational schools (either commercial or technical) which offer a non-academic curriculum, training students in various crafts or for non-academic positions in offices and administrations.

Having graduated from high school is the pre-requisite for entering tertiary education (such as a bachelors in teacher training, nursing, physiotherapy and so on). And of course you must be a high school graduate in order to enter one of the universities.

Tuition is free at all levels of municipal and regional schools, and the same applies to vocational schools and universities. Books and other learning materials are also free in primary and secondary schools. Lately the widespread use of computers has caused families certain financial problems: in spite of very clear guidelines from the Ministry of Education that the cost of computers should be covered by the schools some local councils are hesitant to cover all costs.

Approximately 16% of primary school pupils attend private schools that are substantially

subsidised by the state; with the monthly cost to parents averaging at about EUR 250-200/month. Students at high schools (from the age of 18), vocational schools and university (bachelor, masters and doctorate) are eligible for a monthly maintenance grant from the state of up to approximately EUR 770/month (in 2014).

### The Present State of Social and Emotional Education in Denmark

There are no compulsory national social and emotional education (SEE) programmes in Danish schools.

Both in Denmark and the other Nordic countries a revolutionary shift in focus began in the late 1950s. The purpose of schools changed from ensuring obedience and assimilation of knowledge to the development of each child's individual potential. Women's struggle for greater political and social equality also played an important part in this, as

core issue, came about through Jesper Juul's book "Your Competent Child" (Juul 1995). Based on principles of family therapy, it had widespread pedagogical implications and influenced many teachers and parents to revise their attitude towards children. Until then the cognitive approach had focused on each individual child and his/her performance; now the relational perspective was introduced, focusing on the important contact between adult and child as the basis for social and emotional learning and a necessary prerequisite for academic achievement. "Your Competent Child" was followed by a book called "Relational Competence" (Juul and Jensen 2000) which is widely used by teacher training colleges for both pre-school and school-teachers as well as university colleges that offer much needed post-graduate courses to the pedagogical professions.

When teaching students I usually explain the paradigm shift in the following way: The

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## (In the late 1950s) The purpose of schools changed from ensuring obedience and assimilation of knowledge to the development of each child's individual potential

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did the United Nations' Declaration of Children's rights in 1989. Role-based authoritarian relationships were gradually replaced by relationships based on personal authority allowing for contact and empathy. Research by Daniel Stern into infant development and relationships led to the concept of inter-subjectivity: the child is able to tune into and process signals from the adult, and the child's reactions are therefore always meaningful (Stern 1985).

The strongest influence on social and emotional education, focusing on reflection as the

smallest meaningful unit in a school is not a child or a teacher, but rather the relationship between a child and a teacher.

The philosophical background for "Your Competent Child" dates all the way back to one of Grundtvig contemporaries, Søren Kirkegaard (1813-1855), who is considered to be the first philosopher of existentialism and a strong advocate of dialogue as the basis for human interchange.

*If one is truly to succeed in leading a person to a specific place, one must first*

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## The smallest meaningful unit in a school is not a child or a teacher, but rather the relationship between a child and a teacher

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*and foremost take care to find him where he is and begin there. This is the secret to the entire art of helping.*  
(Kirkegaard 1848)

Jesper Juul has brought Kirkegaard's concept into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, defining "relational competence" as

*The ability of the pre-school teacher/teacher to "see" the individual child on his/her own terms and adjust his own behaviour accordingly, without renouncing his leadership and ability to be authentically in contact and to assume full responsibility for the relationship.*  
Juul and Jensen (2000, p 128)

Authentic contact requires the responsible adult to be personally present in the relationship, more than merely assuming the role of being a teacher. Primary school children have no need for "sweet" teachers, but rather

shows that leadership is paramount to problem solving in the classroom (OECD 2004).

Too many teachers teaching inclusive classrooms despair due to the lack of resources and the additional support needed for pupils with learning difficulties, and their demand for obedience only leads pupils to question their authority and leadership. On the contrary, leadership means assuming responsibility for

- interest
- inclusion
- acknowledgment
- decision making and
- conflict management.

It is vital not to regard children with challenging behaviour as children *with* problems, but rather as children *in* problem situations. Children always do their best to cooperate with whatever is offered (good or bad) by the

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## Authentic contact requires the responsible adult to be personally present in the relationship, more than merely assuming the role of being a teacher

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teachers who are willing to assume leadership and will define a clear framework for the social life of the class. Teachers need to give up their authoritarian ways without losing their authority. In a pilot review of the quality and equity of schooling outcomes in Denmark, the OECD points out that research

significant adults in their lives (mostly their parents, but also their teachers). If the outcome is not satisfactory, the teacher needs to look at herself and ask: how do I meet this child, and what can I do to improve my connection with him/her, how do I organise my teaching? In this way the minimal meaningful

## It is vital not to regard children with challenging behaviour as children with problems, but rather as children in problem situations

unit or 'building block' within a school or a kindergarten is not the child, but rather the relationship between the teacher and the child. The competence of even very young children has to do with their ability to express their immediate needs either verbally or otherwise. The challenge lies in the fact that they do not very often express themselves in immediately understandable terms. Through reflection, parents and teachers must do their best to decipher the message. What is the meaning behind the words or the behaviour of the child? Acknowledgement (as opposed to assessment) becomes the key concept:

*Acknowledgement is not a technique of communication, but rather a form of dialogue based on the adult's willingness and ability to relate openly and in an inclusive manner to the child's inner reality and self-understanding.*  
(Juul and Jensen 2000, p. 235)

The defining value of this approach is 'respect for diversity'. I mention this because it is an issue in Danish culture. Before, anthropologists always came from "here" and went "there", but recently the Indian anthropologist Gopal Kusum, doing fieldwork in Denmark in 2001-02, observed that Danes were not very good at equating equality with diversity. Kusum pointed out that in Denmark uniformity seemed to be a prerequisite for equality (Kusum 2002).

A child with so-called behavioural problems is a child who somehow tries to "cooperate" as best he or she can with whatever conditions have been offered to him or her by the

responsible adult. The behaviour may certainly be very challenging and inappropriate from the adult's perspective, but this does not equate to assuming any intentional destruction or obstruction on the part of the child. If there is support for this notion, teachers can stop paying too much attention to behaviour and start concentrating on needs. Aggressive behaviour begins when harmonious interaction is blocked, and the child in an important relation loses the feeling of being valuable to the teacher (Juul 2013) or, in other words, runs low on self-esteem. Referring to the existential level in our personal life as the level where personality, behaviour, patterns and emotional reactions are formed, Juul further says:

- No person can force the development of another human being
- No person can develop without first accepting his own present state of mind
- A successful process requires a solid personal relationship between the helper and the person who receives help.  
(Juul 2013)

In practice the adult's challenge has to do with being "personal". In relational terms this means talking about yourself, and not about the child. You cannot change the behaviour of another person by saying "do this and don't do that....." but rather by assuming authority and telling the child what you want, and what you will not allow. Thus "personal" equates to "acknowledgment" as opposed to being "impersonal" (i.e. talking about the other) which equates to assessment. A personal approach will (in the best

of circumstances) serve as an invitation to the child to change his behaviour. In the case studies later in this chapter you will find several examples of such good practice.

It would be counter-productive if schools were to concentrate exclusively on social and emotional education. It is imperative to insist on the duality of academic and socio-emo-

tions as regards various types of facilities and subsidies so that to the extent possible families can plan family and working life according to their needs and wishes;

- iii prevent the vicious circle of deprivation and exclusion by making pedagogic measures an integral part of both the local authority's overall, general offer to children and young people and the preventive and

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## You cannot change the behaviour of another person by saying “do this and don't do that...” but rather by assuming authority and telling the child what you want, and what you will not allow

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tional competences; the well-being of children depends on their being acknowledged, both academically and socio-emotionally. But one must bear in mind that the social arena is more fundamental than that of academic learning. As a Norwegian study shows, pupils' behavioural problems in school do not primarily originate from poor academic performance but rather from a lack of social competence (Sørliie 2000).

### Day-Care Institutions

Public day-care institutions are governed by the Day-Care Act, which gives the local council the responsibility to approve the pedagogical curriculum:

The purpose of this Act is to

- i promote the welfare, development and learning of children and young people through day-care, after-school and club facilities and other socio-pedagogic after-school facilities;
- ii provide families with flexibility and op-

supportive activities aimed at children and young people requiring special support, including children and young people with diminished mental or physical capacity; and

- iv create coherence and continuity between facilities and make transitions between facilities coherent and age-appropriately challenging for the children

Purpose of day-care facilities

- 1 Children in day-care facilities shall have a physical, mental and aesthetical child environment that promotes their welfare, health, development and learning.
- 2 Day-care facilities shall cooperate with parents to provide care for the children and support the comprehensive development and self-esteem of the individual child and contribute to the proper and safe upbringing of children.
- 3 Day-care facilities shall promote children's learning and development of competencies through experiences, play and educationally

planned activities that give children room for contemplation, exploration and experience.

- 4 Day-care facilities shall give children co-determination, co-responsibility and an understanding of democracy. As part of this objective, day-care facilities shall contribute to developing children's independence, skills in entering into committing social relations and solidarity with and integration in the Danish society.
- 5 In cooperation with parents, day-care facilities shall ensure a good transition to school by developing and supporting basic competencies and the desire to learn. In cooperation with schools, day-care facilities shall create a cohesive transition to school and after-school facilities.  
(Socialministeriet Act 501 of June 6, 2007)

Noting the basic fact that day-care institutions exist to enable families to “plan according to their needs and wishes” (point ii above) it

day-care is for 1 – 2/3 year olds. It either takes place in private homes (with a maximum of 4 children) or at nursery schools. The term kindergarten always refers to provision for 3 – 6 year olds. Nurseries and kindergartens are mostly municipal, but may also be private.

I have decided to describe two preschool institutions as part of my case material. This decision is partly based on the above mentioned statistics, partly founded on a firm personal belief that increased resource allocation to the preschool field would provide maximum benefit to all children.

### Case Studies

The three case studies below have been selected for their exemplary good practice in relational competence that promotes both social and emotional education. Preparatory interviews were conducted with directors and staff members, and this author spent

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## Give children room for contemplation, exploration and experience” (Socialministeriet Act 501 of June 6, 2007)

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must be emphasised that the overall Act focuses strongly on social and emotional education, as it is expressed in point 3 above “give children room for contemplation, exploration and experience”. The law provides for one-year of paid maternity leave (to be shared between the mother and the father according to their wishes; the mothers still tend to take the majority of the maternity leave). Later, working life occupies a substantial part of the day for most families, as reflected by Statistics Denmark (2012): 68, 1 % of children (1-2 years) go to day-care, and no less than 97, 4% of 3-5 year olds attend kindergarten. In terms of terminology

several days at each institution during the month of November 2013. Interviews with parents were recorded as a basis for the cited examples.

### Case Study 1

#### Ved Vejen / By the Road

Ved Vejen is a so-called integrated institution comprised of a nursery (for children from 1-3 years of age) and a kindergarten (for children 3-6 years of age). It was built a few years ago and is located in the Copenhagen suburb of Albertslund (population 31,000). As climate change occupies an important

place in the public debate, the Municipality of Albertslund decided to construct a zero-energy building using geothermal energy and solar power. It is situated on the edge of the West Forest in open country, facing paddocks and the old village of Herstedvester.

Rooms are spacious and well lit, even though staff have had to restructure some of the interior spaces to create separate wardrobes for the younger and the older children. There is general satisfaction with the architecture, but

- Why-questions. Poems, telling stories
- Fantasy
- Time for immersion, play without interruption
- The ability to make friends
- The right to say no. Expressing emotions in words

#### **Social competences:**

- Understanding of the group
- Ability to see others

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## **Staff must quite simply behave themselves well with the children – there are very few rules to obey**

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the staff would have preferred a single storey building in order to facilitate free flow among the age groups.

The goals of the institution are laid down in the so-called “Practice and Learning Document” (2013) of which the following is an excerpt:

#### **In all relations we want to strengthen three aspects of the child’s personality:**

- Self esteem, defined as a feeling of being appreciated as I am
- Self confidence, defined as a feeling of success that encourages me to try something new
- Independence, defined as the ability to take initiative and responsibility

#### **Personal competences:**

- The ability to express yourself creatively
- Knowledge of different materials (drawing, woodwork, etc), using your senses
- The ability to think independently

- Understanding the fact that there are others than “me” and that at the same time I am “myself”
- Empathy
- Conflict resolution

It is not a problem for us to limit the individual for the sake of the group as and when needed, but there must be more important reasons than mere expedience.

#### **Cultural forms of expression**

We visit art museums, the Viking Village (a local historical workshop), the Nature Centre and the theatre. We make sculptures and paint portraits. We talk about who our families and who we are – what it is like to be the same and to be different. The understanding of democracy is attained by participating in decision-making, discussions and listening.

Mie Christensen, who has been the director since 2003, says, “staff must quite simply behave themselves well with the children – there are very few rules to obey”. The former leader is referred to as a visionary hardliner

who insisted on total respect for the children, and locally the institution is renowned for just that. Mie Christensen and her staff have continued this pedagogical approach and there is a great sense of well-being

with their children in the nursery, facilitating a slow and easy transfer from the family circle to the institution. Parents talk about the previous weekend and are met with interest and kindness by the staff. It is noticeable that

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## The responsibility for good relations always rests with the adults (Ved Vejen Practice and Learning document 2013)

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among the staff. If colleagues address each other's practice, it is out of curiosity: if someone seems to be troubled and mentions having a "stomach ache" she is sure to be contacted by one of the others. This approach has an impact on relationships with the children: there is no scolding, and during my several days' stay I never heard an adult raise her voice. The overall rule of the institution is "you must take care of each other". In practice everybody has "a coffee sister" – a Danish term for someone to confide in.

*Pedagogy is not static but is context-sensitive. There is more stability in the attitude that governs your pedagogical practice. One may talk about expectations of how to behave. Anybody who works at our Institution is entitled to know when her performance is good enough.*

*When it is not up to scratch it's always the responsibility of colleagues to make you aware of this and engage in dialogue about it.*

(Practice and Learning Document 2013)

The nursery section comprises 31 children from the age of 11 months to 2 years and 10 months. It is staffed by 9 pre-school teachers, five of whom have received their pre-school teaching qualification.

The first child shows up at 07:03 with his mother. Parents generally have breakfast

no member of the staff comes on duty without doing the rounds to say hello to each individual child and those parents who are present.

*At Ved Vejen there is ample opportunity to be yourself. The main rule of the Institution is to show consideration. The responsibility for good relations always rests with the adults*

(Practice and learning document 2013)

Children are never reproached:

*C wants to try A's juice: "Go and ask him if you may!"  
(not "it isn't your juice!")*

Reinforcing personal integrity:

*A plays with toy animals and starts screaming when others want to take them away from him: "Please just say that you do not want them to take your animals..."*

Adults speak in personal terms, i.e. they talk about themselves, not the children

*"May I have your dummy?" (not "Now you must put your dummy away")*

At 9 o'clock more members of staff arrive, children are placed in four small groups and

become quieter. Pre-school teacher Eva Mitschke sings the ritual good morning song, and the older children are invited (not ordered) to join the “reading sofa” in the common room. Once they have done so it becomes quite noisy and several children keep climbing on and off the reading sofa – leaving books lying everywhere. The pre-school teachers sense more chaos in the common room than I do – but why gather so many children out there? At 10:30 the reading sofa is tidied up – everybody helps to place the books in baskets.

After that comes the mid-morning snack. Children are encouraged to eat by themselves with no reproaches because of spilled food and bread all over the table.

Children learn to place plates and cups on the trolley at the end of the meal:

*“How nice that you can place the plate on the trolley yourself.  
Thank you!”*

*The regard for the individual and for the group are mutually dependent.  
The group consists of different individuals and should be seen as a dynamic organism and not as a static entity.  
(Practice and Learning Document 2013)*

At 11:40 it is time for the midday nap. Children are accompanied to the “crib room” one by one to create a safe and calm atmosphere:

*“Would you like to take a nap now?”  
(not: “It is time for your nap”)*

Most of the children are tired by now and simply nod. The few protesters are respected and asked a little later. Sleeping time allows the staff to exchange information about the activities and the children, and also allows for a half hour break in the staff room. When the

children get up again N protests – she would probably have liked to sleep a little longer. She is consoled:

*“Oh, you are a little unhappy now, aren’t you?” (not “It’ll be all right”)*

The next morning most local trains are cancelled because of extreme weather conditions. The children, who all live in the vicinity of the institution, show up as usual, whereas staff members are either late or absent all day. Clearly this creates unrest among the children. Many parents compensate by staying longer with their children at the breakfast table. Generally speaking there is a marked difference between parental directions

*“Don’t spill your food all over the table.....”*

and the pre-school teachers’ more acknowledging reactions

*“Oh my, you are hungry today, aren’t you?”*

One of the children hits another child quite violently with his toy. Eva intervenes:

*“Ouch, that hurt. I would like you to move away a little”*

after which the first child is consoled.

In the common area two children are fighting over a broom, each claiming that the other cannot have it. After one has taken the broom the pre-school teacher sits down with the other one in a kind of “cave” made from blankets over a table and sings a song about a dark, dark cave. There is absolutely no scolding or reproaching.

At lunch one of the small girls throws her plate, spoon and cup to the floor instead of placing it on the trolley, as most of the kids

do. This is met with a calm remark from one of the adults:

“Well, I am not going to pick it up for you”  
(not: “Don’t do that !”)

While the children sleep, the plate is picked up, and afterwards the adults complain about all the necessary cleaning up but insist that it usually doesn’t take more than a couple of weeks’ making patient comments like the above, before the girl herself will place her plate and cup on the trolley. One also explains that another way to do it is to insist that that the plate and cup must go on the trolley and say: “It must go on the trolley, so I will put it there. Tomorrow you do it!”

In the staff room we have a conversation about children who push, bite or hit other children. These behaviours will always be stopped by an adult, but again it is important

“code-breakers”; in reflection they must try to decipher the message.

The absence of male staff is noticeable (which is the same in most other preschool institutions and primary schools in Denmark). One of the little boys had a short talk with me during breakfast after crying a little, when his mother left, and followed me around like a little puppy for the rest of the day. The women at Ved Vejen do a great job but also lament the lack of men; male pre-school teachers tend to apply for jobs in institutions and schools which care for children who need special education. At “Ved Vejen” the teachers consider the institution to be understaffed, but nevertheless manage to retain an atmosphere of peace, calm, and security, permeated by high-quality care. Not only is the food served at lunch organic, but one can say that the pedagogy of the whole institution is organic in that all staff members have an in-

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## Whatever the child says or does it should always be taken as a message about the momentary need of the child

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not to reproach the child in question. If a child repeatedly pushes and hits others it is interpreted as a nonverbal message - I don’t feel too well, please come and help me.

The staff find that this kind of behaviour is often created by chaotic conditions in the family, resulting in unclear boundary-setting. These very small children do not have a verbal language in which to communicate and resort to other possible “languages”. There is always a “meaning in the madness”, cf. Jesper Juul’s concept of the competent child: Whatever the child says or does it should always be taken as a message about the momentary need of the child. The adults must consider themselves “riddle guessers” or

egrated sense of what children need and show high quality relational competence, thus promoting both emotional and social education. I consider their “Practice and Learning Document” an excellent example of down-to-earth thinking - and not least so after having witnessed their practice.

### Case Study 2

#### Udflytterbørnehaven Kattingeværk Forest Kindergarten

Forest Kindertagens exist primarily in Germany and in the Scandinavian countries. Nature and unsupervised activities form part of the pedagogy.

Children are picked up centrally in Copenhagen and taken by bus to beautifully wooded countryside at the Fiord of Roskilde, Denmark's old Viking Capital.

Kattinge Værk was originally one of the first industrial establishments in the area, centered on a water-mill. Today the buildings and area are preserved by law and include a nature school plus facilities for school camps. The children have access to horses, goats, rabbits and chickens. The forest makes it easier to create ample space for children, who are not under close surveillance all the time. According to former director Birthe Nielsen children acquire an inner calmness, which also spreads to the staff. Many children like to sit by themselves from time to time, as a 5 year girl explains to me:

"I like to sit up here by myself. When I can see the water I think so well"

"I love to lie down with the children and watch the clouds in the sky"

Informal feedback from district schools indicate that grade 0 children who formerly at-

groups, one of which is a basic group for children with special needs.

Children may check in from 7 o'clock; the bus leaves at 0830 and arrives at Kattinge Værk at 0915. In the bus the children may sit and talk with their friends, play, have a book read to them or just enjoy the trip. The pre-school teachers have had long discussions about the substantial amount of time spent in the bus every day (a total of 1½ hours); apart from being a necessity if you want to bring city kids out into nature, the institution finds that in the bus

*Children learn to take into consideration their own well-being and that of others. There is learning with regard to reading and dialogue, and important relational work takes place. For some children the bus trip provides them with the opportunity for a break in which they may recharge or simply stay in their own calm space.*

([www.kattingeudflytter.dk](http://www.kattingeudflytter.dk))

In addition, staff consider it a great advantage that children and adults spend the whole day

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## Informal feedback from district schools indicate that grade 0 children who formerly attended Kattinge Værk (Forest Kindergarten) seem to have a much better social competence than others

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tended Kattinge Værk seem to have a much better social competence than others; they are especially good at helping other children in a number of situations.

There are about 50 children (3-6 years of age) in the kindergarten, divided into three

together – everybody goes out and comes back on the bus.

There seems to be a good atmosphere in the bus, most children talk with other children. Former supervisor Niels Krogh points out, though, that the limited space

can be quite a challenge for some of the children in the basic group who tend to get stressed and require more attention from the adults. I talked with a 4-year old girl on the way back one day and asked her about the bus; she reminded me of the sometimes poetic language of young children:

*"Don't you think it a long bus ride?"  
"Oh, yes it is. But it is also a long bus!"*

When we arrive at Kattinge the children are very relaxed and organize various groups by themselves. Three girls play in a small loft; one of the boys wants to join them but is turned down and asks for help from one of the pre-school teachers, who in a very calm and friendly way ask the girls about the problem.

*"It is OK for him to come up here. But we would like him to ask permission first and not just come barging in"*

The pre-school teacher explains this to the boy who then asks the girls and is let in.

*Inclusion is that which is created among the children. The more socially competent children learn how to include the less strong, and the less strong profit from*

Later in the morning the children go to "The Grass", the large outdoor playground and organize games themselves: Shop, swing, pirates and hide-and-seek on the "island", the scrub area where adults are out-of-bounds. I intend to go in there to take pictures, but I am politely informed by one of the boys that I must first ask permission. It was granted and I was kindly let in.

Lunch is eaten in small groups: Again there is no rush: Nobody mentions anything about after-lunch activities; they all take their time to eat. After lunch the children decide which activity to join: Drawing – making puzzles – baking cookies. I talk to the mother of a new child in the basic group who has experienced an amazing change: In the old kindergarten there were too few adults and most of them shouted and reproached the children; here she finds all the necessary space for her son.

On the way back to Copenhagen most of the children sleep on the bus.

Next day the bus is completely full (the older children did not go to the forest the day before as they were engaged in school-preparation activities.) The children seem well instructed about the rules of the bus: Safety

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## Today there is an excursion to the forest ... Characteristically everything takes place in a pleasant slow-motion, there is no rush at all

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*the togetherness and the relationships. Pre-school teachers must be acknowledging and be present and conscious of the children's relationships and "push" them to the point where they may develop their own competence and relationships. (www.kattingeudflytter.dk)*

belts must be used, and folding tables may not be opened. Maybe because of the larger number of children there is more confusion about activities when we arrive than yesterday.

Today there is an excursion to the forest. The children know the rules: They are allowed to

go by themselves, but must always wait for the adult at selected points along the path: The overturned tree, the red marker, the House of the Witch. Today they all have to pick things from their favourite spots in order to create a kind of 3D picture for a Christmas present. Characteristically everything takes place in a pleasant slow-motion, there is no rush at all. We go past the Peter Pan Tree and along the Scary Forest to the place where caves have been built. In order to get to the caves children must go down and up a muddy slope which is challenging at their age – it is remarkable how many children offer spontaneous help to others who cannot make it.

At lunch each child decides what food and how much of it she would like on her plate. After lunch a book is read aloud in “Line’s Cinema”: Lights off, curtains drawn, 2-3 children share the same blanket. A boy runs out and hides in the wardrobe; Lene asks three of the older girls to help him, they leave and shortly afterwards come back with a seemingly happy boy.

Before returning to the bus the children sit in a circle on the floor, taking turns to tell each other about their day. The same boy as before doesn’t want to sit down, but throws himself on the floor. The interaction between the two adults is exemplary:

*(Nikolai) “Won’t you please sit up like the others?”*

*(no reaction)*

*(Lene) “It was not a good idea to ask him a question”*

*(Nikolai) “Oh yes, of course you are right – I want you to sit up, I will count to three and then you are ready!”*

*(At the count of three the boy sits up like the others)*

In post graduate courses about relational competence I always emphasize the necessity

for the adults to master this kind of exchange before they can apply it to their relations with the children. In a sense, the staff group constitutes a “training ground” for adults who want to improve their relational competence.

*The adults must be ready to wonder and investigate, whenever there is a problem. We consider the problem belongs to us, not to the child. It is important that all children can participate in everyday activities in their own way. We try to create an environment in which there is great inclusiveness, and where the children, in spite of their different competences, may benefit and learn from each other social inclusion is not about creating changes in the individual child. That is not possible. Rather it is about creating changes in the pedagogical practice in order to improve the possibility for all children to participate in the group.*

*(www.kattingeudflytter.dk)*

### **Interview with Niels Krogh, former supervisor of Kattinge Værk**

Niels Krogh is an Aarhus based family therapist, originally trained at the Kempler Institute founded by Jesper Juul. He has worked as a nurse in psychiatric wards and is also a trained therapist in the field of Somatic Experience (SE). He says,

*“What children need is time, space, and time to be”*

A great number of children are in a state of increased alertness – stress hormones are triggered, as can be seen from their behaviour. Limited space is often an important factor, and many children over-adapt as a meaningful strategy for survival. Kattinge especially creates time and space. It is a slow-motion kindergarten!

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## “What children need is time, space, and time to be” (Niels Krogh)

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The bus-transportation, however, may be rather hectic, especially for the basic group.

Niels Krogh says about emotional education:

*“That is to get help to exist in life, so that you may be here with your own senses and feelings, and a sense of the others. Day-care institutions have two important purposes: The development of social competence and the development of self-regulation. The child wants acknowledgement of what he/she senses. It is not something we learn, it is something we are born with; whether you are happy or angry it must be acknowledged.”*

Behaviour is often defined as unwanted – we have a tendency to focus more on children’s behaviour than on their needs. Preschool teachers must be helped to talk with children

house on the outskirts of Randers, a relatively large provincial town in the main peninsula of Jutland (pop app. 61000). The school considers itself to be part of the general project of inclusion, which is at the top of the agenda in the Danish school system these years; the staff believe that necessary exclusion limited in time is a prerequisite for some of the pupils, in order for them to be able to go back to normal school. In addition to the classical special school set-up of “All-day-schools” (small groups of 4–8 children taught by one teacher and one pre-school teacher), since 2009 Oust Mølle also comprises a so-called “Family School” based on the Marlborough principles (Asen, Dawson & McHugh 2001). The basic concept of family school based on the Marlborough principles is that a parent must participate in the school day; children at the family school attend Oust Mølle Family School 2 or 3 days a week, and the rest of the time they spend in their home class at the

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## When a child hits or bothers another child we know that something does not feel right to him/her

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about their lives. One can always guess from one’s own experience: When a child hits or bothers another child we know that something does not feel right to him/her.

### Case Study 3

#### Oust Mølle day school

Oust Mølle School is a municipal special school for children (6–12 years) with emotional problems. It is situated in an old manor

normal school. Families must also attend the classical All-day-school once a week, every Tuesday at the All-day-school is “Great Family Day”.

Says director Finn Almind and family class teachers Jette Søby and Susanne Mogensen:

*“Parents are the invisible class mate. Sound education always comes about via parents. One must always trace*

**“Parents are the invisible class mate. Sound education always comes about via parents. One must always trace threads back to the individual family.”  
(Almind, Sjøby & Mogensen)**

*threads back to the individual family.  
We do not work through morality”.*

By this they mean that the teachers do not impose their morality on the children and their parents. Rather they acknowledge the rules and morality of the family.

At Oust Mølle emotional education for parents and staff is considered to be:

- Being in contact with yourself
- Being able to express feelings in words
- Being able to “read” your children
- Building self esteem

#### **Family Classes**

The first activity of the day is a round in which pupils relate what they have been up to in their home classes; parents must mention something positive about their children. Next “today’s target” for each child is noted on the smart board. For example, one child should finish reading a story and then tell the story to his mother. Another child should concentrate on her work for at least 15 minutes at a time. The child must know in concrete terms what is expected of him/her. At the end of the day the parents are called upon to evaluate the day in relation to the targets.

One of the boys crawls under the table “I hate school because no one helps me!” His mother shows signs of not knowing what to do, but there is no intervention from the teachers, who instead ask the other parents for advice:

*“As a teacher you must learn to sit on your hands. Parents must make the intervention, that’s what they are here to learn”*

Teachers will always acknowledge any way parents try to solve conflicts. In the process they will, however, also discuss other solutions (alone with the parent without the child).

Excerpts from interview with E’s mother:

*“It has been fantastic – his fits and aggressive outbursts had completely burned us out, whereas now we have learned what to do. He has now been here for 8 weeks, and his teachers at the normal school also participate in talks (with us & with the other teachers in the family class) the challenge at the beginning was the exposure to other parents, but we soon learned they had similar difficulties. I have no doubt that many children would benefit from this offer.”*

B is back for a visit. She attended the family class 3 years ago. Her mother says

*“She would not get up in the morning, wouldn’t listen, was overly aggressive for up to two hours at a time. When we finally got here she refused to leave the car. She had been diagnosed with both ADHD and OCD. The home fight continued here at the beginning, it was difficult in front of the other parents, but I felt that the teachers understood what was going on and sympathized with me.”*

### B herself adds

*In a sense it was OK to have my mother here, even if it was irritating that she should help me with my school work. But it was much better than the other school, where my teacher blamed me in front of the whole class.*

### T's father

*This works! As a non-professional I am convinced that the economy of this is super (it is a good investment of time and money). We have had two children here and it has produced major changes in their lives. I consider this 100 % inclusion because not only the children go to school; children often have problems for which their parents are responsible. I have learned to see my children in a positive way, to set limits and that it is hard work to change habits both for my children and myself. We have adopted the methods from here and set up targets at home, for example about not teasing your big brother. Here we collect victories!*

### O's mother

*O was diagnosed with ADHD three years ago. It did not go well: She slammed doors, wanted to decide everything for herself and there was a lot of screaming. She has now been here for 9 months, and I have learned to react differently, and not to pressure her too much. Before we simply took all the blame for how it went; now we know what we can do about it. We have also participated in talks with other parents, where we get good advice not only from the teachers.*

After lunch there are activities in the small gym next to the class. Children, parents and

teachers all participate. They play a hit and run ball-game and have a lot of fun plus they learn how to manage an activity through set rules.

In a "lego relay", you must run to the other end of the gym, have a short look at a hidden lego figure, run back and copy it exactly. In addition to the fun it trains visual attention and concentration.

One of the All-day-school group consists of 8 pupils with teachers Niels Jelsing and Ove Christensen.

As in the family school classes, targets are explicit for each of the children, not only for one day, but for periods of two weeks at a time; activities during breaks are chosen each morning for that particular day. While a teacher bakes bread, a pupil sets the table, and the others go to one of the two group-rooms until breakfast is ready, and parents begin to arrive.

At mid-morning a conversation takes place at the large table in the common room between the teachers, pupils and parents. Every Tuesday there is a different theme, today the focus is on television and computer habits. Niels serves coffee to the parents; one mother remarks that it is just like going to a café. There is a very open conversation; many of the parents are against the sharing of photos and videos on YouTube and Facebook.

The teachers explain that children diagnosed with ADHD are especially vulnerable if exposed to violent computer games. Games can be okay, if parents set a well defined time limit for their use. It is important to shy away from games in which the player has to identify with one of the characters. Says one of the mothers "My son disappears entirely into that world, and it scares me".

Afterwards, in class, parents participate; they are actually the ones teaching their children supervised by the teacher. Ove wants to have a private conversation with a mother, but she protests against leaving her daughter, who is not feeling very well. This is accepted, and she doesn't leave until after a while. While she is talking to Ove, Niels tries to sit down at the daughter's desk:

*"I don't want to talk with you "*  
*"All right, I will have to remember to ask you later"*  
*"Don't sit there!"*  
*"Please tell me where I may sit?"*

Teachers do not raise their voices and do not contradict the children or the parents.

The teachers find that the hardest challenge is when there does not seem to be any development over time. Talking about emotional education they refer to the Russian actor and acting teacher Stanislavski (1863–1938)

*You must learn to know your instrument, before you can play*

R's mother

*It was a defeat for me to realize that I had a child with learning difficulties (R has been diagnosed with ADHD). His former school had given up, and he is not going back there! Here you learn to talk about the problems, that was also harder at the old school. As a parent you meet other parents in similar situations and R can recognize his own feelings in other children who are diagnosed like him. I think that emotional education has something to do with being able to talk about your feelings. It works well for R to verbalize when he becomes aggressive, and learns some strategies to contact his feelings without having to fight or run away.*

*At the beginning Tuesdays were not structured enough, but it has become much better. We had to set up a reward system to get him out of the house in the morning, but that has improved a lot. I feel very bad when listening to how long other parents had their children at home, because school had given up: I am stubborn, if I had not been such a strong advocate for my own child, we would not have had a place here. Now I am on the school board where I meet Finn (the director) and other staff members. You are always invited in, included and made to feel safe about the school. R's pre-school teacher is super: For the first time we met another person who was able to see R as he really is. That is why he does not succeed in provoking any adult here at Oust Mølle. I think the children react very positively to well defined adults. Teachers from other schools should come here to observe and learn! I also think highly of the fact that both trained teachers and pre-school teachers cooperate directly in classes. The folkeskole should do more of that because it actually works!*

Teachers from the Folkeskole actually do get the chance to participate at Oust Mølle; Staff also form an outgoing team which provides supervision to other schools and gives lectures to teachers and parents, thus improving the often neglected substance of the concept of inclusion, that not only calls for allocation of resources, but also in-service training for the teachers...

What permeates the dialogue at Oust Mølle on all levels is the positive approach.

I personally felt there was almost too much praise (assessment as opposed to acknowledgment<sup>1</sup>) in dialogues with parents, so much that at times it came across a bit too much as

“method”. On the other hand, when I asked the parents about this they were unanimous in their answers: They had never been treated so well at any other school, or by any other public authority for that matter.

### Teacher Training

Before visiting another school (Case Study 4 below) I will comment on aspects of teacher training in Denmark and the challenges that

sire to grow. In order to open up such new universes also in school, teachers must be much more aware of themselves in order to relate to pupils on a personal level. There is a need for tools to enable teachers to observe how the concrete processes of education, or rather, indications of these processes, unfold themselves. By indications of processes I mean teachers being given the tools so that they are able to observe, for example, the

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## Education has been described as the process through which one transcends one’s own world and gets involved with a larger world

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face student teachers in the field of social and emotional education. The social and emotional aspects are denoted by general formulations in the objects clauses of the formerly cited day-care and school acts. But the elements of social and emotional learning tend to disappear when it comes to description of goals and contents. In Danish education there is a change of emphasis from education to learning, i.e. what is currently emphasised is what the students should master with regard to academic competence at the end of school.

Education has been described as the process through which one transcends one’s own world and gets involved with a larger world. It is not only about acquiring knowledge or skills but has to do with changing the way of relating to these skills. The day-care act focuses explicitly on the educational processes themselves. Play in itself creates the transcending processes: In a fantasy world the child pretends to be someone else and manages to merge with the others in a universe of play. In a sense play promotes the child’s de-

way that children respond, the degree of contact between an adult and a child, and become more aware of their own behaviour and the language that they are using.

### VIA University College Project

An action research project at VIA University College in Århus intends to create a much needed bridge from theory to practice. VIA incorporates four of the former Teachers’ colleges and now both trains future preschool and school teachers in addition to its many post-graduate and in-service courses. VIA’s core values are openness, diversity and originality:

*We aim to develop study programmes and solutions that are not matched or outdone by other institutions.*

*Originality is one of the three values, as we believe that an original approach to the development of study programmes and original solutions within the educational field will be essential for our ability to continue attracting future students and collaborators.*

(VIA 2013)

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## **...teachers who are able to relate to the students in a friendly, good way, based on equal dignity, have far better learning results. (Nordenbo 2008)**

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In cooperation with the society “Børns Livskundskab” (The Danish Society for Promotion of Life Wisdom in Children) VIA is conducting a research project together with 6 schools in Århus, teachers’ colleges, and the Institute for Education and Pedagogy (IUP) at the University of Århus.

The project aims to develop a professional terminology and practice for teachers’ relational competence, i.e. how student-teachers’ professionalism may be developed through practice in being present, empathy and relational competence. The idea is that each student teacher should learn how to express his/her academic competences in a personal and emphatic way in order to create a safe, creative and developing learning environment in class. The project began in 2012 and aims at following 60 student teach-

professor at the University of Århus and head of The Danish Clearinghouse for Educational research, showing that teachers who are able to relate to the students in a friendly, good way, based on equal dignity, have far better learning results. (Nordenbo 2008). Nordenbo’s findings coincide with those of professor John Hattie of Auckland University, New Zealand, in a much larger metastudy (Hattie 2009) – although this author wishes it to be noted that Nordenbo does not agree with Hattie’s conclusions about the need for meritocratic differentiation of teachers’ salaries; this is not considered compatible with Danish culture).

In the current school debate there is a lot of ambivalence with regard to the goals of school – according to the project group it is important not to swing all the way from academic com-

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## **The VIA studies focusing on recently graduated teachers have indicated that most difficulties arise from meeting the parents, relating to challenging children, and working in teams**

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ers through their education and into the first years of their practice as teachers.

The following relates to an interview with psychologist Helle Jensen (project supervisor) and two of her colleagues, drama therapist and psychologist Katinka Goetzsche and psychologist Else Skibsted on December 12, 2013:

Their project is based on an earlier meta study by professor Svend Erik Nordenbo,

petence to relational competence – balance must be maintained. It is not either or!

In the present act governing teacher training the following areas must be included in the teaching of all academic subjects: Didactics, relational competence, and classroom management.

The VIA studies focusing on recently graduated teachers have indicated that most

In her book about empathy Helle Jensen gives examples of exercises for children: (Jensen (Ed) 2013)

**(Body)** Pay mental and systematic attention to all parts of your body

**(Breathing)** Observe your breathing without intervening. Pay attention to inhalation-pause-exhalation-pause. Feel your stomach change size, when inhaling or exhaling.

**(Heart)** Place your hand over your heart. Think of someone you like a lot, your best friend, your parents or your brother or sister. Let the loving feeling spread throughout your body. Then get up, walk quietly and slowly around in the classroom.

Feel your body and your breathing while silently meeting the others, one at a time. Look him or her in the eye and give a small nod. When you have greeted everybody this way, sit down and wait till everybody has finished.

**(Consciousness)** Children are often fascinated, if you say: Try to keep an eye on what is going on inside you? Then feel a thought, follow it, and see it fade. And right there when it is over, and a new thought has not begun, there is a small space – so small that you can almost not feel it – if you relax, you prolong the pause, you stretch it. (Adults often think that there can be no space between thoughts, but children have no such prejudices, they simply look for the space). It takes courage to stay with the pauses; our culture teaches us that pauses are idle, that we should work more, go more to school, do more, finish more quickly.

**(Creativity)** Do something that traditionally is considered creative; draw, sing or dance. Tell yourself or your children “have you noticed that right now we are doing something we never did before?”

difficulties arise from meeting the parents, relating to challenging children, and working in teams. In addition, a study by Lars Lindhart at the University College of Nordjylland at Aalborg shows that obtained academic knowledge has very little significance for new teachers, because no or little attention has been paid to personal prerequisites in the various subjects (Lindhart 2004). Academic/analytic competences are well mastered, but communication skills are sadly lacking.

Whereas the studies I have mentioned emphasize the importance of relational competence, there is as yet very little knowledge of how this is brought into practice: which concrete practical skills should be mastered ?

Emotional education has to do with getting to know yourself as a prerequisite for entering into authentic contact with others. There is a strong bodily aspect, exercises for attention and presence.

Practical exercises are based on the 5 basic innate areas of competence: Body, Breathing, Heart, Consciousness and Creativity.

“New student teachers could hardly speak 3 minutes about themselves, now (after 1½ years) they can do so for 15-20 minutes”

“Teaching math is not so much about the subject as it is about the prejudices

with regard to math – That is what bridges the barrier of ‘I can’t do math’”

“The students seem to have discovered that our work together may be the way to professionalise classes. The eye – opener has been “Then there is quietness” and teaching becomes possible.

“Essentially our work has to do with training the areas of attention and the ability to focus. It is not only about compassion for children with attention deficit disorder, but about general teacher competences: how we create a good learning environment. Instead of disciplining the pupils, the focus is on self-discipline, a way in which to balance yourself.”

“It goes beyond the relation; children must learn about each other, and about the subject, so that attention is focused on both themselves and the real world.”

The unique aspect of the project is that teacher trainees and their mentors, who are experienced teachers, are educated together through monthly courses. In addition, the teacher trainees are mentored during their teaching practice in the school. In this way mentoring, which has simply not been good enough up till now, is improved. There is a very positive aspect in creating similar conditions for new teachers as those that exist for newly educated medical doctors. Hospitals are training grounds for doctors, and similarly schools should be training grounds for teachers. It is a logistical and cultural challenge to make many institutions cooperate (colleges, schools, directors, school counselors, etc).

Although many countries run regional and national programmes of social and emotional learning, the VIA representatives feel that it

should permeate teacher-student relationships on all levels. They realize that giving social and emotional education a name such as “existential skills” would bring much needed public attention to it in today’s society, but they would not want it to be introduced as a subject in itself.

### **Will Denmark have a School for Life in the Future?**

The present public debate about PISA 2012 is characterized by two aspects:

First, a rather complicated debate about the statistics involved, which relatively few people (and certainly not the media) understand very well. A few days before its publication at the beginning of December 2013, the Ministry of Education announced that PISA provided no sound background for benchmarking. We should try to compare ourselves with PISA 2009 and only relate to the average of all the test scores; only four days later PISA 2012 hit the media with a precise indication of Denmark’s placement among the countries involved, completely contradicting the former statement. This demonstrates the strong focus on academic results and productivity in both the public and professional debates. Understandably this is also spurred by cost-benefit analysis based on a yearly cost per pupil (in 2014) in the Folkeskole of approximately EUR 8850, probably one of the highest in the world. Within the statistical uncertainty there was no progress compared to PISA 2009; in general Denmark scored average (in Mathematics) and below average (in Danish and Sciences) to the disappointment of many scholars and politicians. There has been more criticism of teachers than thoughtful reflection about the lack of effect of, for example, the many national tests that have been introduced in the last few years.

The second, and perhaps most important aspect, is the almost complete lack of debate

about social and emotional education. There seems to be a fear of entering into much debate about what in Denmark is commonly denominated “character education”. To enter into character is about controlling your own life, take responsibility and to try to transform this into existential practice. What makes a good life for children hasn’t so much got to do with academic performance in school as with social qualities. A common belief is that cognitive skills as reflected in PISA scores are more important than anything else. This is often combined with a not particularly well founded claim that starting school at a younger age would produce higher test scores.

It is therefore paramount to be critical when judging the present initiatives within the Danish education system. One such project is the New Nordic School (NNS) aimed at combining day-care institutions and schools, which has been launched by the Minister of Education, Christine Antorini.

The Aims of New Nordic School (0-18 yrs.)

- 1 Provide challenges to all children and young people so that they achieve the highest possible level of proficiency
- 2 Minimise the impact of social background with respect to learning outcomes
- 3 Enhance public trust in day care facilities and educational institutions and promote the respect for professionals’ knowledge and work.

(New Nordic School 2012)

Again the first aim points at the result-oriented school, but a closer look at the values outlined in the NNS manifesto seems to provide some hope

*Manifesto of New Nordic School (0-18 yrs.); the New Nordic School shall be the bedrock for the progress of the*

*Nordic societies and inspire education worldwide – driven by a new interpretation of the Nordic tradition for a holistic approach to the social, mental and cognitive growth of children and young people.*

#### Case Study 4

##### Albertslund Unge Centre (AUC Youth Centre)

One of the almost 400 schools and day-care institutions that have by now signed up for the NNS project is the Albertslund Unge Centre (AUC) 10<sup>th</sup> grade school, one of the public schools in the Municipality of Albertslund, where I had the opportunity to interview the director Maibritt Svensson. Referring especially to the values set forward in the NNS manifesto she spoke well for the project. She agreed that the project description included many buzz-words but mentioned, however, that one should perhaps always be suspicious of what is called “New”.

The ideas put forward in NNS coincide with much of the work already in progress at AUC, especially with the school’s declared ideology of “taking school out into society”. During the first semester students attend AUC three days a week, and either a commercial or a technical school belonging to the association of vocational schools called CPH West in the neighbouring municipality of Ishøj. One of the basic ideas of NNS is to set up networks between folkeskole, upper secondary, vocational schools and even day-care institutions in order to create more coherence in the over-all system.

Of the present 120 students (ages 17-18) no less than 65% are of another ethnic origin than Danish. As earlier mentioned, 10<sup>th</sup> grade is an optional year in the Folkeskole, and it is meant to guide the students to make realistic choices for their further education.

Most students who leave the Folkeskole after 9<sup>th</sup> grade go directly to the general upper secondary school; very few chose vocational studies at technical or commercial schools. There is a much more varied choice of further education for students leaving 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

General education is a separate subject at AUC, aimed at making the students active members of society. According to Maibritt Svensson they receive a lot of young people, of which relatively few may be characterized as “students”, in that they lack both academic competence, personal and social competence and motivation. She considers those areas of the utmost importance:

*“Social and emotional education is all about being realistic, which is very different from stigmatizing the student in the role of victim or loser”*

On the relational level AUC has introduced what they call “action learning”:

One teacher defines the area of attention, and a colleague serves as a “mirror” to create a concrete background for teacher-to-teacher reflection. The municipality wants this practice to spread to other schools. This could take the place of the otherwise much needed, but almost non-existent supervision in the normal school system. At the University Colleges a large effort has been made to educate so-called AKT- teachers (Adfærd = Behaviour / Kontakt = Contact / Trivsel = well-being), who are supposed to assist colleagues in areas beside the academic; they are trained in relational competence and classroom management (the commonly used but misleading term, it should be called classroom leadership instead). However, too few resources have been allocated; more attention should be paid to abolishing the “one-teacher-one-class” practice and

allow for much more witnessing by colleagues to take place.

Perhaps NNS has a chance to point the way out of the current situation of our school system, as each participant institution is encouraged to set up and assume ownership for its own dogmas. This could form a welcome change from the stealthy centralisation that is signalled by the many national tests.

### **A Return to the School for Life**

I think the Danish educational system is facing a crisis similar in magnitude to that of 1814. I realize that the scope is different, and of course the schools must cater to the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century society. In 1814 Grundtvig was aware of the necessity to create a school for life and had the courage to argue for the implementation of his ideas despite traditions and religious influences. We must change course so that life skills again become the most important outcome of our basic educational system.

Today we may lean not only on Grundtvig’s firm beliefs, but also on a lot of evidence of what is the most important; Nordenbo and Hattie’s metastudies have already been mentioned. Professor Per Fibæk Laursen at the University of Århus sums it all up:

*Research based knowledge cannot form the platform for evidence based teaching, if by that you mean a set of prescriptions of how to organize teaching*

*Results do not indicate that centrally planned tests or other external measures have direct impact on the quality of teaching. It is the way of the teacher and her relationship to the students that is crucial. (Laursen 2006)*

It is my sincere hope that efforts such as those initiated at the VIA Teachers’ College in

**Results do not indicate that centrally planned tests or other external measures have direct impact on the quality of teaching. It is the way of the teacher and her relationship to the students that is crucial (Laursen 2006)**

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Aarhus will spread to teacher training throughout the country. Teaching climate is becoming more oppressive, a conflict between the state and the teachers' union resulted in a month's lockout in the spring of 2013, there has not been sufficient dialogue between the ministry and the Teachers' Union about the upcoming school reform, and as a result there is a lot of unrest in the profession and doubts about shared ownership of the school of the future. Directors may play an important part:

*Pedagogical institutions receive their guidelines from the political system and an administration that – for good reasons – do not always think in terms of professional pedagogy and psychology. Therefore it is important that directors possess the necessary courage for professional disobedience.*  
(Juil and Jensen 2000, p 156)

We still preserve our high ideals of equal opportunities for all; but we must not succumb

to equating quality only with what is measurable. The structure of our society has caused us to delegate a large portion of child care to our institutions and schools, and they therefore face an incredibly important task in educating our children for life. At this point it is also worth mentioning that Danish students in lower secondary school came top in an international study on civic knowledge, attitudes and engagement (ICCS 2009).

A former professor at DPU, The Danish Pedagogical University (now a faculty at Aarhus University) Per Schultz-Jørgensen makes the following statement: (Newspaper Information 15 January 2014):

*We measure and test children like never before, today we do it all the way down to nursery age...this testing continues in kindergarten, school and at vocational schools. And it has intensified. The measurement and the testing is rooted in the wish to control and has to do with maintaining the system. Herein lies the*

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**Most of all I believe in the teachers. I know that, in spite of working hours and school reforms, the education of the individual pupil in the end depends on the individual teacher's enthusiasm and will – the individual heart (Ditte Jensen)**

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*epistemology and the rationality, therefore it may be paradoxical to verbally plead for another opinion about the right of children to childhood, play and free expression. It makes no impression whatsoever on the representatives of the system, who think they have complete control of reality. Those who think otherwise are considered Romantics.*

As primary school teacher Ditte Jensen is one of the “Romantics”, I find it appropriate to let her have the concluding remarks of this chapter ([Folkeskolen.dk/538810/laerere-nytarstale-det-livgivende-organ](http://Folkeskolen.dk/538810/laerere-nytarstale-det-livgivende-organ))

*I believe in the Folkeskole as one of the pillars of our society. This is where our children meet across social strata, religious convictions, and the size of their parents' wallets. Most of all I believe in the teachers. I know that, in spite of working hours and school reforms, the education of the individual pupil in the end depends on the individual teacher's enthusiasm and will – the individual heart.*

*So, dear heart, you are the paramount life-giver for the future. Find your rhythm and show your strength. I believe in you as a colleague, as a parent, and as a citizen. The stronger we beat together, the more we are heard and can create resonance in the population – and who knows, also way up in the corridors of power.*

Albertslund, Denmark  
November 2014

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> By assessment I mean “grading” the parents by saying something like “Well done – you did an excellent job”. On the other hand acknowledgement has to do with personal comments made by the teacher to the parent, for example, “it has been good working with you today, thank you.” The difference between assessment and acknowledgement has to do with the value of equal dignity which is stronger in the latter. I thought that the parents were being overly graded but they did not consider this as a lack of equal dignity.

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