



## Country Report Denmark

### Parental involvement including ethnic minority parents in Denmark 2009

Denmark has had a long tradition of involving parents in the education and schooling of their children. But only lately have parents from non-Western countries received special attention. Ethnic minority parents form a growing group in Danish schools and school-home collaboration involving parents with different ethnic backgrounds other than Danish has proved to be a major challenge for many schools. Many schools are therefore looking for methods and tools to improve cooperation and dialogue with these parents to develop and test new methods of school-home cooperation. They hope to focus on the specific challenges that may arise in cooperation with the parents from non-Western countries in order to strengthen the bilingual students' academic and social skills.

The Act dealing with the Folkeskole<sup>1</sup> states in the first paragraph that

*Folkeskolen in cooperation with the parents give students knowledge and skills to prepare them for further education and motivate them to learn more, make them familiar with Danish culture and history, giving them an understanding of other countries and cultures, contributing to their understanding of human interaction with nature and promoting the individual student's all-round development ... Folkeskolen must prepare students for participation, responsibility, and the rights and duties in a society based on freedom and democracy. School work must therefore be characterized by intellectual freedom, equality and democracy.*

Folkeskolen are a municipal responsibility. The local council ensures that all children in the municipality get free education in primary and lower

school (Folkeskolen). The municipal council determines the objectives and framework of school activities.

#### Basic structure of the Danish school system (Folkeskolen)

The Danish *Folkeskole* is a mixed ability school for 7-16 year old pupils, i.e. a school with no grading. It is financed by the local municipalities. Around 13% of all pupils attend private schools which are financed up to 85% by the State. The *Folkeskole* is a fully comprehensive school based upon differentiated teaching of the individual child. A faith in comprehensiveness has been a fundamental principle in Danish curricula.

The *Folkeskole* provides nine years of compulsory comprehensive education, together with a voluntary pre-school class and an optional tenth year. Pupils are divided into year groups by age, and progression from one year to the next is automatic. The pupils stay together in the same group of pupils, called a class, for all 9 years of compulsory education. A class is made up of between sixteen and twenty-six children.

#### Class teacher

Although there are thorough changes in the pipeline in restructuring the Folkeskole into three age levels, the old tradition of a class teacher or two in each class is still predominant. Most class teachers are responsible for the same group of pupils for most of their primary and lower secondary schooling and for the contact with their homes.

The class teacher is responsible for teaching the young people some of their academic subjects, as well as having a clear pastoral responsibility, which includes creating group unity within the class and liaising closely and regularly with the parents of their pupils. The class teacher is some-

<sup>1</sup> Primary and lower secondary school contained within one system *Folkeskolen*

one with whom parents have an on-going relationship, and someone whom they in many schools can contact by telephone or mail, often out of school hours. The class teacher has the main responsibility for the emotional, social and cognitive learning processes in each class. He/she coordinates these processes with the team of teachers in each class each year. In schools with many pupils of ethnic minority parents bilingual teachers assist to some extent.

### Home-school contact

Many class teachers regularly send home newsletters and papers for the individual parents to prepare for the two consultations each year which are to be held with the class teacher and sometimes with other teachers in the class. During these conversations the class teacher informs the parents how their child is progressing and behaving. Some schools have a homepage on which the parents can see what is going on in their children's class.

It is, as stated above, the aim of the Danish Folkeskole to carry out its activities in cooperation with the parents. The *Folkeskolen Act* is very clear on this point requiring that parents and school cooperate, and that pupils and parents are regularly informed about the school's opinion on how each pupil is profiting from his or her schooling. "Regularly" here means at least twice a year and refers explicitly to information about the pupil's personal and social development as well as his or her academic attainments.

### Teacher Education

In spite of the above aims and intentions of the Danish Folkeskole, teachers have little education or training in cooperating with parents. During recent years there have been at least four reforms of teacher education programmes, but this issue has taken on a reduced status.

### School Board

A school board, ensuring parental influence, has to be set up at each independent school. The school board consists of 5-7 parent representatives elected by and from among persons who have custody of children enrolled in the school; The students of the school elect two student representatives to sit on the school board. The student representatives participate on a basically equal footing with the other school board members. The school board conducts its activities within the targets and framework laid down by the municipal board and supervises the activities of the school.

The school board

- lays down the principles of the activities of the school (such as principles for home-school cooperation, the number of lessons, special education, optional subjects),
- approves the budget of the school,
- approves the teaching materials to be used in the school,
- submits its opinion to the municipality about the appointment of teachers and headteachers for the school,
- may make proposals or submit its opinion on any question relating to the school.

Very few ethnic minority parents and pupils are members of the school boards. At present 2.7% of parents with a non-Danish background are members. The Danish Parents Association, Skole& Samfund, tries to encourage these parents to become members.

### In retrospect

The relationship between home and school has changed during the last century. During the period of industrialisation tasks and responsibilities were disconnected and separated in order for

governments and business to be able to control processes and products and to ensure the amount of working capacity needed by the new industries and other new enterprises.

Education became a special task put into separate institutions. In most Western industrialised countries it became a task and responsibility of the state. One reason was and still is to compensate for many parents' lack of sufficient skills and knowledge to educate their children properly, another reason was and still is to make parents support and agree to school learning, and a third reason is gaining ground: to ensure the qualifications of the labour force in a competing labour market. For these reasons, the role of the parents and the opportunities to influence their children's learning differ.

Three periods can be distinguished. These three periods are each characterised by certain reasons or rationales for involving parents in education and they reflect the current social development in society – not only in Denmark but in most of the Western countries. And they often overlap:

*Compensation (late 1800–1960's):* The school and teachers compensate for what the family/ parents are considered unable to provide, as a consequence of which the role of the class teacher was initiated in Denmark. The parents' role is limited to the home and the private sphere. Learning is subject-specific.

*In 1960–1990 Democracy and consensus* are the prevailing ideas. Parents are considered important for the upbringing of their children and for the school – theoretically together with the children and the teachers. Learning is comprehensive and covers the idea of educating youth and adults for democratic citizenship.

*Competition and marketisation (late 1900s and currently):* Although it is still a deep-seated belief that the parents' role and the relationship with the teachers and the school are based on an idea of community, it is apparent that parents as individuals now to a great extent are considered accountable and responsible for their children's behaviour and academic learning as contributors to producing a competitive national Danish and global labour force. Government orders are taking on more importance. Learning is becoming influenced by the "back to basics" ideas.

It is particularly within this last period that a number of families from outside the Western societies have entered Denmark. Many are puzzled and confused by Danish school life and philosophy, because the Danish school is still under the influence of both the democracy-consensus rationale and of the competition-market rationale. But we can observe a tendency that ethnic minority pupils and their families are 'treated' within the idea of compensation: they have to adapt to the Danish values. See below.

### **Ethnic minority parents and children**

In the school year 2007/08 there were nearly 72.000 bilingual students in Danish schools. This represents 10 percent of the students. 42 schools had more than 50 percent bilingual children.

In the public school's 10th class, the proportion of pupils with different ethnic origins is almost twice as high as public school's lower grades.

Most students of other ethnic origin than Danish come from Turkey. This is followed by students from Iraq, Lebanon and Somalia.

The proportion of pupils with different ethnic origins are highest in the metropolitan areas. And here they visit private schools to a greater extent than in other parts of the country – in some districts even up to 70 %.

### Measures to support bilingual children/students

The local authorities are obliged to offer language stimulation training to the bilingual children living in Denmark who are in need of such training. On 1st January 2003, the maximum age limit for children offered language stimulation training by the local authorities was reduced from four to three years. Since August 2004, it has been compulsory for bilingual children to participate in language stimulation training.

The language stimulation has two main target groups. The first target group is bilingual children who do not attend a day-care centre. These children may participate in 15 hours of language stimulation activities per week. The second target group is bilingual children in need of language stimulation training who attend a day-care centre. The scope and length of the training of each such child are determined by expert evaluation. There is no formal or politically accepted mother-tongue teaching or learning. There are continuous discussions for and against this. But a study has shown that among schools trying to improve the collaboration between parents from another ethnic background than Danish the communication with these parents is in the mother-tongue.

Bilingual children in primary and lower secondary schools are offered training in 'Danish as a second language', if so decided by the school principal.

If the bilingual student needs basic instruction in Danish, the student will be referred to teaching in

a reception class, teaching in teams or individual instruction. Bilingual students who participate in the ordinary teaching, but who are in need of special support, are referred to supplementary teaching in Danish as a second language. The number of lessons is determined in accordance with the need of the individual child.

In 2004 a report was published by the Danish Ministry of Education on national policies for education. Among five recommended themes one was "*Improved opportunities for bilingual and special needs students*". No genuine research project has, however, been launched on the above-mentioned theme. Action has been taken to register the number of bilingual students in receipt of the extensive special education provision. No special action has been found necessary, "as the number of bilingual students is not higher than the number of other students".

In spring 2007, a set of guidelines was published on how the Folkeskole's provision of special tuition to bilingual students should be organised. The materials make it clear that some bilingual students may have a need of both language training in Danish as a second language and special education, and that the paed-psychological studies must take into account that test methods and investigation methods to a large extent are developed on the basis of norms specific to the Danish cultural context<sup>2</sup>. The guide-lines explain the provisions regarding *the Folkeskole's* provision of training in Danish as a second language and offer inspiration on how to plan and implement the training.

With the adoption of new rules in 2006 regarding special education, it has been emphasised that special education must either be provided as an integral part of classroom teaching or organised outside the classroom, so as to ensure that the student in question does not miss classes in other

<sup>2</sup> These official initiatives include cooperation with the parents although this is often difficult because of language and cultural background and traditional perceptions

subjects. The changes were implemented in an Executive Order in December 2005, and a set of guidelines on the Executive Order was published in January 2008.

As part of the Government strategy to combat ghettoisation, the Danish Government has launched the project "This works at our school", which was implemented in the years 2006-2007. The project focuses on good teaching practice, second language teaching, school leadership and organisation, enhanced parental responsibility, teacher expectations and the wide dissemination of results, partly by means of a completely new website ➔ [www.dettevirker.dk](http://www.dettevirker.dk).

### Government initiatives related to bilingual/ethnic minority parents

In 2008 a *Bilingual Taskforce programme* (➔ [www.tosprogstaskforce.dk](http://www.tosprogstaskforce.dk)) was introduced by the Ministry of Integration. One part of this was "Home – School Co-operation". This is being implemented together with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Affairs.

For the first time parents of bilingual children are getting special attention in the formal school-home relationship.

In 2009, 52 school-home tutors have been appointed to help strengthen school-home collaboration with bilingual parents by way of courses in this area, and a guide/handbook is in print for the tutors. There are a total of 56 million kroner available to strengthen the parental involvement of ethnic minority parents in primary schools in the years 2008-2011. Three funding rounds for school-home tutors in the school years 2010/11, 2011/12 and 2012/13 are planned. The new school-home tutors are to create activities directly targeted at bilingual parents. Additionally, school-home

counsellors advise colleagues in creating a successful school-home collaboration with bilingual parents as well as with ethnic Danish parents.

Selsmoseskolen in Taastrup, Denmark, has for a long time had a school-home coordinator who has got time to create a trusting relationship for the parents with another ethnic background. The school's example shows that a supervisor function is a very effective way to involve parents, so that they are better involved in student education and school events.

Along with these initiatives the Government has launched several legislative measures to keep control over the growing number of new citizens and citizens whose children appear to misbehave.

### Guidance on increasing parental responsibility

*Ministry of Social Affairs guidance of 6th June 2006*  
A new guidance on strengthening parents' responsibility was implemented by the Ministry of Social Affairs (Socialministeriet) and marks a mix of logistics from educational, social and economic spheres.

It represents an increase in the participation of the state in the role of an authority that exercises control over both children and their parents. The law aims at re-educating parents to make them capable of raising (educate) their own children in ways in which the authorities find appropriate. It provides authorities with the means, which were never seen before in Denmark, to sanction parents financially, for instance by not paying the child-family social benefit (børnefamilieydelse).

The purpose of the law is ostensibly "to support socially vulnerable children by committing their parents to take on their responsibility as parents"<sup>3</sup> (Socialministeriet 2006, page 1). These parents are not invited to an equal or mutual dialogue. They are invited to commit themselves to some specified activities in relation to their children, the so-called parenting order.<sup>4</sup>

The government does not try to disguise that they consider the new law a kind of warning to all parents. In the commentary on the law it is said "The stance of Government is that parents should adhere to their responsibility" and in an admonitory tone it is added:

The Government wants to mark a disapproval by society of those parents who will not take on their responsibility as parents, and at the same time mark the support to parents who want to take on their responsibility (Socialministeriet 2006b, page 3)

The Government has several times emphasised that the new law is especially considered as an important tool in relation to minority families with another ethnic background than Danish, and in fact the background for the law was the Government "Plan for the integration of immigrants" of June 2005. The special 'problems' of families with another ethnic background than Danish is mentioned several times in the 'inspirational material' (inspirationsmateriale) published by the Ministry of Social Affairs. A general warning of 'disapproving of parents who refuse to take on their responsibility as parents', seems especially to be addressed to immigrant families to whom the

Government wants to make "visible central values in Danish society".

The idea behind this material is to give the professionals (social worker, teacher, counsellor etc) concrete tools and social technologies that enable them to establish a dialogue and moreover to formulate a social contract (agreement) which commits the parents to act "in the best interests of the child".

Previously social workers have lacked methods in their work with minority families with another ethnic background than Danish to function as a cultural bridge and to make visible central values in Danish society and to make visible the expectations by society of the individual family. However, the 'inspirational material' seems to be valuable for this purpose, since it covers many themes and gives rise to a holistic dialogue that sets free more and new reflexions in families as well as among counsellors (Socialstyrelsen 2006 c, page 4)

Even though this text – as well as other parts of the 'inspirational material' – seeks to maintain elements from the theory that has characterized school-home cooperation until now by stressing that the dialogue should be holistic and based on equality, it can't be disguised that the relations between social workers and the family are understood to be fundamentally unequal, since the family in the specific case is described as if its members do not know about "central Danish values", and do not know what "the expectations of a Danish society" are. Therefore the professionals are asked, according to central authorities, to make visible these values and expectations before a so-called 'equal dialogue' can be established and before a parenting agreement (contract) can be drawn up and signed.

<sup>3</sup> "at yde støtte til udsatte børn og unge ved at stille krav til deres forældre om, at de påtager sig deres ansvar som forældremyndighedsindehavere"

<sup>4</sup> Regeringen ønsker at markere samfundets afstandtagen til forældre, der ikke vil påtage sig ansvaret og samtidig samfundets støtte til forældre, der gerne vil påtage sig ansvaret.

## Initiatives of involving parents with non-Danish background

Because co-operation with the parents is an integrated part of the Danish law on the Folkeskole (see above) many initiatives of various kinds are continually being started during which parents are involved in their children's school life, in social activities and in dialogue and discussion with teachers and their children as well as with each other about schooling (academic and social affairs) and to some degree about leisure time activities. It is evident that many ethnic minority parents attend these activities only to a limited extent, because of the language, because of their own other school tradition and other perceptions of schooling and learning.

The approach to get parents with another ethnic background more involved is now being strengthened in order to integrate them by means of training school-home counsellors (named above) and through their efforts. This process is in its preliminary phase. Many of these initiatives comprise home visits, workshops, evenings with meals in special cultural traditions, home-work cafés (in a few cases including parents), a more extended use of interpreters in home-school contacts and parent meetings, and in some cases visualising school expectations in the home-school relations to help understanding.

In some municipalities and or schools they have tried to introduce *family classes*. This is an invitation to parents to learn how best to help their child to learn and behave. It is primarily a government initiative in the process of handing over

more responsibility to the parents. In other municipalities and or schools '*whole day schooling*' has been tried as an experiment. This is part of a national education strategy to go new ways in relation to ethnic minority pupils, dealing through this with pedagogical questions as well as a number of educational policy problems. The experiment in Vollsmose<sup>5</sup> municipality has, from an educational perspective, been a success, but in a social perspective with relation to the ethnic minorities these parents and families feel their integrity has been offended because they feel excluded from the community and are considered as a special group in need of special attention.

The Danish initiatives are all primarily based on the idea of integration, in the sense of making the ethnic minorities adapt to Danish culture, and very few on a multicultural pedagogy, in the sense of accepting and involving different cultures. This is evident when looking at the Danish Folkeskole's focus on Danish culture and language.

As it is a formal request as well as a 'culturally given fact'<sup>6</sup> that the Danish Folkeskole for years has had to co-operate with all parents – whether Danish or not – the long and varied experiences of co-operation will also include foreign parents. But examples of special efforts to activate these parents are in their preliminary phase and experience so far tells us that ethnic minority parents don't want to be treated as a marginalised or special group.

<sup>5</sup> *Heldagsskolen som, uddannelsespolitisk initiative* ↪ [www.dpu.dk/omlarsh](http://www.dpu.dk/omlarsh) "Publications"

<sup>6</sup> A current Danish Research project, financed by the Danish Research Councils, *Home School Co-operation – a cultural given* is close to finalise ↪ [www.dpu.dk/skole-hjem](http://www.dpu.dk/skole-hjem) – a short version in English ↪ [www.dpu.dk/home-school](http://www.dpu.dk/home-school)

## Useful links

⇒ [www.uvm.dk](http://www.uvm.dk)

Homepage of the Danish Ministry of Education

- the Folkeskole Act
- statistics overview
- Legislative Decree No. 1195 of 30 November 2006 *Folkeskolen's objects clause*

⇒ [www.dettevirker.dk](http://www.dettevirker.dk)

A Government launched project to combat ghettoisation 2006-2007

⇒ [www.tosprogstaskforce.dk](http://www.tosprogstaskforce.dk)

2008 a Bilingual Taskforce programme

⇒ [www.socialministeriet.dk](http://www.socialministeriet.dk) [www.isn.dk](http://www.isn.dk)

Ministry of Social Affairs

- Plan for Integration of Immigrant June 2005
- ...

⇒ [www.inm.dk](http://www.inm.dk)

The Ministry of Refugee, Immigration and Integration Affairs

⇒ [www.skole-samfund.dk](http://www.skole-samfund.dk)

Danish Parents Association: This association (which has a legal status) produces a lot of material – written information, guidelines, recommendations, ideas – for the school boards to help improve home school co-operation. They are involved in the Government project on involvement of bilingual parents and on improving the co-operation with the ethnic minority parents.

⇒ [www.ernape.net](http://www.ernape.net)

European Network about Parents in Education. This now international network was established in 1994 and has had conferences every second year.

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