
Feedback from school visits in Denmark

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A lecture theatre and learning pod at Ørestad Gymnasium, Copenhagen

We visited two schools and spoke at length to the headteachers of both:

Ørestad Gymnasium – a brand new secondary (16-19) school built in a newly developed part of Copenhagen

Hans Christian Anderson School – a brand new primary (6-16) school built in a heavily immigrant populated part of Odense

What became evident from both visits is that the schools were designed under the guidance of the educationalists from the equivalent of the DCSF. The headteachers were appointed six months before opening so that they could influence interiors but their appointments were based on their pedagogical vision for the learning and teaching within the designed buildings. Both had very different designs and hence challenges but both were evolving in line with the headteachers' visions. Both schools were considered to be experimental for different reasons.

Ørestad Gymnasium

The school is designed to cater for 1300 students. It had only 16 classrooms. All other learning and teaching took place in a mixture of small lecture theatres and open plan spaces. The ICT strategy and teachers' willingness to negotiate the use of space made this possible. The headteacher described this process as a form of "deliberate disruption" in that it required members of staff to plan collaboratively both in terms of learning content and available resources. The ultimate driving force for L&T here was visibility. All staff members clearly understood the vision for the school and were employed on that basis. Flexibility of curriculum delivery is the norm. One period you may be in a classroom, the next you could be in an open space. Use of the VLE and most students being equipped with laptops helped make this possible. Specialist areas might have more access to classrooms e.g. Science.

The curriculum was organised into inter-disciplinary learning areas. Each team had a leader whose responsibility was to coordinate the writing of SoWs into themes covering their equivalent of the National Curriculum. Each team has a particular learning focus e.g. science. Students study a broad curriculum but have a learning focus where the majority of their time is spent.

Other interesting points:

- There were no offices. The reception was open plan. The headteacher sat here with his deputy. While being more accessible to students/parents/staff, he is less accessible to 'quiet words'. There were three rooms off this space for confidential for meetings.
- The ICT strategy was open access Macs for as many as possible. They had enough devices for half their students while many had their own.
- All the catering was self service. The students' food was paid for depending on how much it weighed. They got 1300 through lunch in 40 minutes. The students could eat anywhere in the building (a huge open plan building on 4 levels – think Royal Festival Hall). There was evidence of some debris left across the building but there were cleaners working all day.
- Everyone we spoke to in the conference in Odense had heard much about this experimental school.

The headteacher was more focussed on how students learn, what skills they acquire and how prepared they are for further education than results, although the pressures in Denmark are similar to here. He considered the school to be an "experiment" and appeared excited about the potential to influence national policy through establishing a contemporary institution. He was well informed about educational philosophy, recent research about learning and the various cultural and economic drivers for change.

Hans Christian Anderson School

This is a large school designed for just 400 students. One of the many challenges for this school is getting the parents and wider community to support the work of the school, to raise aspirations for their children.

This school design was much more classroom based than at Orestad Gymnasium. There was a very clear philosophy underpinning the learning and teaching in the school which was embodied by the headteacher but shared by the majority of staff. Again, she appointed all staff members on the basis they signed up to these values.

Their driving forces were:

flexibility (the curriculum and timetable change frequently)

self-reflection (a culture of reflection and evaluation pervades the school)

collaboration (all work is planned in teams of two or more and staff members are actively prevented from working in isolation from one another)

collective responsibility (all teachers are responsible for the environment and atmosphere within their classrooms and around the building)

creativity (the primary aim of the learning experience is to provide opportunities for young people to experience “flow”, a creative absorption in their learning)

the individual learner (members of staff were encouraged to get to know individual students, their learning styles, particular talents and social background so that they could best motivate them. If a student was not co-operating in class, the headteacher’s view was that the class teacher had not made enough effort to discover how that child could be better engaged.)

These values are accepted and understood by all members of staff. There are easier schools in which to find work so staff members stay because they are committed to the vision.

Other interesting points:

- The children began every day with an assembly.
- The library (learning centre) was packed with small group work, teaching, ICT access – a lively hub of activity.
- Different age groups started and ended their days at different times – as did the staff.
- Extended school services exist on site to support students, parents and the local community – dentist and medical care.
- The headteacher was also much more focussed on how students learn, what skills they acquire and how prepared they are for higher education than national test results. She nevertheless felt that the school’s approach would inspire young people and promote a positive attitude to life-

long learning. She was keen to stress the importance of emotional intelligence and the acquisition of social skills and reflected on the inadequacy of the formal examination system to assess personal qualities.

Recommendations

Although Thomas Tallis is going to be newly built rather than exist as a new school we still believe we can treat the next two years as preparation for a 'new school'. How do we meet the raised expectations of the community/authority/DCSF after a £47m new build?

- Re-state the values and educational philosophy of the school. Do all students understand them? Do all parents? Do staff members understand and agree with them? If not, how do we tackle this?
- Discuss how we can put our newly re-stated values and philosophy into practice? How do we encourage reflective practice? How do we promote more collaborative learning (both between members of staff and between staff and students)? How can the curriculum, the organisation of learning spaces and school day be better co-ordinated to facilitate creative learning?
- Re-think the learning and teaching strategy for our new school. Set up a timeline with certain markers so that all staff and students are ready for our refreshed approach.
- Create a New Technologies strategy to enable the realisation of our vision for learning and teaching. Is ICT a subject? How should the ICT curriculum be delivered in the future?
- Develop a coherent plan for supporting the local community so that Tallis becomes an active learning hub, responsive to local needs.
- Organise a series of benchmarking visits to schools engaged in next practice research through the DCSF Innovations Unit.