

# The School of the Community

## The Danish Folkeskole - society's most important institution

The Danish Folkeskole (primary and lower-secondary school) is at issue - as always. The school is the result of almost 200 years of democratic development, and is certainly not the result of natural forces.

We are all involved in determining the future development of the Folkeskole, but for that we must make a few choices.

The future of the Folkeskole must not be left to chance, simply because we do nothing and fail to take the necessary discussions.

How do we want the Folkeskole to develop as a national institution?

Three possible developments emerge:

- *Discontinuation of the Folkeskole as a national, common basic school*  
To be replaced by wholly locally based institutions, perhaps followed by privatisation.  
The differences in society will grow bigger.
- *Giving a lower priority to the Folkeskole*  
As a result, the public school system will be for the less gifted pupils, thereby increasing the polarisation in society.
- *Deliberately focus on the Folkeskole as the national basic school*  
The Folkeskole will preserve its vital value for society - and thus for the individual.

The Folkeskole must ensure that the coming generation acquires knowledge and skills, i.e. develop the pupils' competence and general educational background.

But at the same time, the Folkeskole plays a pivotal role in

- the development of Danish democracy
- the communication and development of culture and opinions
- the socialisation and development of common values.

In many contexts, the Danish Union of Teachers has contributed to bringing developments in the teaching of the Folkeskole into focus, and the members - teachers, pre-school class teachers and head teachers - make sure that the Folkeskole continues to develop.

There should be no doubt that we still want to develop the Folkeskole, in order for the individual to benefit as much as possible from the teaching. Perhaps it is not surprising if we claim that the Folkeskole is Denmark's most important national institution.

But we do mean that - which is why so many of us have chosen to teach in the Folkeskole.

With this leaflet we wish to make sure that the focus will be on the role of the Folkeskole as a national institution in the future.

## **The Folkeskole is an important prerequisite for the Danish democracy**

The common Folkeskole is based on our society's democratic traditions and constitutes an important precondition for the Danish democracy in itself. Democracy is not won once and for all. It has to be taught and developed in each generation.

Among the features of the Danish democracy are:

- that everyone is guaranteed basic knowledge
- that you learn how to acquire knowledge
- that you are able to assess statements and information critically
- that we subscribe to the idea of equal opportunities for all
- that we respect other people and their opinions.

The Folkeskole plays a major part within these fields. The School for all is a prerequisite for a Danish democracy that works and represents more than a matter of voting every four years.

In the Folkeskole the pupils have the experience of seeing themselves as part of a community with mutual commitments whose participants they are not free to choose themselves. They have to learn how to behave and how to be and act together to ensure that there will be room for everyone.

To ensure democratic conversation, everyone must acquire common knowledge and basic cultural techniques such as reading, writing, arithmetic, mathematics, IT skills and languages. Therefore, there is every reason - also for the sake of democracy - to give these areas a high priority. If the pupils acquire basic knowledge and a thorough introduction to the systematics and analytical tools of the individual subjects, they will acquire the basis for evaluating themselves and for seeking new knowledge.

It is important for the pupils' understanding of democracy and for the development of their ability to take a critical position on various issues to confront them with the diversity of the Folkeskole, in groups of pupils as well as among the teachers. They must encounter different opinions and be trained in actively taking positions. The teachers must be themselves and clearly of both personal and professional integrity.

As the professionals, the teachers are responsible for the teaching, but they must also make room for the pupils and their views. By involving the pupils in the process of choosing subject fields and working methods, the pupils are trained in assuming joint responsibility and in influencing the decisions. The pupils - together with their parents - have a share of the responsibility for learning and developing as human beings. At the same time, they are prepared for participation in the decision-making processes and for accepting to share responsibility in society.

Participation in the activities of the local community are an important element of the Danish democracy. The Folkeskole contributes to strengthening the local

ties. The feeling of community is anchored in the local communities. Therefore, the local Folkeskole is also the school of local democracy, where the local authorities through dialogue with parents and employees will flesh out their objectives and explain how to accomplish them.

It is a joint responsibility to ensure that the Folkeskole will live up to its important role in the development of democracy in Denmark.

- The Danish Parliament must ensure that the democratic dimension remains an important responsibility for the Folkeskole.
- The local authorities must ensure that the resources and buildings of the Folkeskole live up to the increasing demands.
- Parents as citizens should consider the democratic aspect when choosing a school for their children.
- The pupils must participate actively in the activities of the class.
- The teachers must individually and together assume the specific responsibility for the contents and form of the teaching.

### **The Folkeskole - the most important communicator of culture**

The Danish society has established a large number of important cultural institutions, but the Folkeskole is the only place where a broad segment of the population will come into contact with a concentrated effort to communicate culture. The culture is the basis the individual personality, and without a national, independent culture we will have no independent society. However, no society should be concerned only with itself.

A glance at the programmes of television stations is enough to show that this influential medium is dominated to an excessive degree by Americanised piece-goods - the Danish culture faces major challenges.

Internationalisation leads to an increasing need for a sound cultural basis. That is important if we are to be able to act internationally and to understand the foreign cultures which are playing an ever greater part in our everyday lives.

It is an important task for the Folkeskole to pass on our common history and cultural heritage. The children need a common frame of reference - the possibility of thinking in terms of *we*.

For without that they will not be able to develop openness to what appears strange and unfamiliar at first sight.

Culture is not merely a matter of looking to the past. It is just as much a matter of pointing ahead and preparing the pupils for making their own contributions. Only through cultural challenges like narration, music, image formation, and drama will it be possible to realise the children's full potential.

The Folkeskole must endeavour to make everyone want to express themselves culturally. Both through the pupils' own creative efforts in class and through encounters with the established expressions of culture in the form of theatres, museums, music, and the involvement of guest teachers.

The language plays a special role in relation to the common culture, and in this respect, too, the Folkeskole plays a leading part. It is necessary to devote more attention to the communication of language both in the Folkeskole and in the training of teachers.

We have to discuss very carefully how the Folkeskole fulfils its role as communicator of culture while respecting and benefiting from the cultural diversity that is going to characterise the Danish society in future. Beautiful and inspiring surroundings and works of art in the school contribute to a good teaching environment. But a stimulating learning environment will not suffice. It is necessary that involved and competent teachers assume responsibility for communicating the cultural values to the pupils.

Respect for other cultures does not imply that everything is of equal value.

Equality of the sexes and respect for each other are examples of basic values in the Danish society that we must all recognise. The mutually committing community which includes *everyone* in the Folkeskole and in the individual class is essential if we are to establish a sense of cultural community across cultural barriers.

Danish culture is not static but undergoes constant development. Cultural diversity is an important contribution to the development of the culture - at school, too. Now, at the individual school, we have an opportunity to experience new music, new games, new art, new food, etc.

Without a common Folkeskole, the sense of cultural community, so important to the idea of a Danish society, will disappear.

- The Danish Parliament must provide guidelines for the Folkeskole's role as communicator of culture. This cannot be left to the individual local authority.
- Committed and competent teachers are required to accept responsibility for the communication of culture in the schools.
- Government and local authorities must accept the responsibility for solving the problems which so very clearly accompany the integration of the many new citizens who do not have a Danish cultural background.

### **A school for all**

The pupils will acquire valuable social competencies by participating in the community of the Folkeskole.

This is essential for the opinions and the social understanding - the education - which the Folkeskole participates in imparting to the pupils. By virtue of this community, the Folkeskole contributes to keeping society together.

In the communities of the school, the pupils learn to show consideration for others. In the Danish Folkeskole, the focus is on the individual pupil, but the individual is nothing outside the community of the group. If the sense of community disappears, so will the freedom and the possibilities for individual growth. As the "school for all", the Folkeskole represents an opportunity to ensure that

this essential appreciation of others will extend beyond social and cultural barriers.

In this respect, the individual class or form is a cornerstone of the Folkeskole. The class is the principal organisational basis for the teaching. The class and the class teacher are also essential for well-functioning relations between school and parents. In addition, the teaching is organised in other ways than as class instruction - often in the form of periods involving several classes and year groups to ensure maximum subject-related and personal challenges for the pupils. However, the pupils acquire valuable social competencies by being part of the mutually committing and easily defined community of the class. A community the pupils cannot simply drop, merely because that seems to be the easiest solution in the circumstances.

The development of the Folkeskole in the direction of a school without any permanent ability grouping should be considered in the same light. Experience shows that the individual pupil's potential is better served in the comprehensive type of school than in the ability-grouped school. But if the school is seriously going to consider everyone's interests, it will be necessary to renovate the school buildings to make it physically possible to vary class sizes. In many school districts, unfortunately, the schools have seen the gradual dilution of the resources that used to accompany ability grouping, which makes it very difficult seriously to organise the teaching in accordance with the abilities of the individual pupil.

A frequently debated issue is whether the children are the responsibility of the parents or the school and whether the school has a role to play in the general upbringing of the children. The children belong to themselves but certainly also to the parents and to society. The school is essential to their socialisation and upbringing, but naturally the school can never replace the efforts and responsibilities of the parents. It is necessary to carry on a close dialogue about the joint responsibility for the children's upbringing and education.

Since many of society's traditional communities are disintegrating during these years, it is especially important for the pupils to acquire the necessary social skills at school.

- **Only by giving the Folkeskole our full support will we be able to pass important social competencies on to everyone in the next generation.**
- **The school for all requires 100 per cent public financing.**

### **Common values and diversity**

Knowledge and abilities are nothing in themselves. Without a sound basis in shared values, it will be impossible to find your bearings and use your knowledge and skills. It is the Folkeskole's responsibility to assist the young people in discovering meaning in their lives and in finding their way around society and forming their own standards and opinions.

The Folkeskole communicates values which are common and basic to the Danish society. The basic values of the Folkeskole are not established at the individual school or in the individual local community. That is a matter for the Danish society as a whole and, consequently, for the Danish Parliament.

Thus, the basic values are not locally decided but will have to be fleshed out and "translated" in the local community.

In the previous paragraphs, several of the Folkeskole's basic values have been emphasised: Equality of the sexes, cultural and social understanding, and active participation in the democratic decision-making processes.

A common set of basic values is not in contrast to the desire for diversity and respect for others - on the contrary, these elements are part of the common basic values.

In reality, the Folkeskole is the most free of schools, precisely because it is a school for all and because it is possible for everyone to influence the values and direction of the school and the class.

The common basic values reach across political, cultural, and ethical barriers. That is why it is so important for the pupils in the Folkeskole to experience different adults. In his teaching, the teacher must show his personality and use his freedom of choice in teaching methods professionally. This is the only way of ensuring that the Folkeskole will demonstrate the diversity which is such an essential element in the education of the pupils.

Established values may contribute to reducing the sense of insecurity many pupils feel when confronted with the changes in society. Dialogue about values and consciousness of the fact that culture is contingent on history and, thus, changeable may put their own lives into perspective and contribute to establishing a code of ethics as well as moral standards.

- **The Folkeskole must contribute to the development of the pupils' human, social, and political education to enable them to leave their mark on their own lives as well as on society.**
- **It is an important element of the common basic values that we as human beings are responsible for more than ourselves.**

### **Knowledge and education - the responsibility of the Folkeskole**

As mentioned at the beginning, with this leaflet we intend to focus on the most important tasks of the Folkeskole in relation to society. However, it is important to emphasise that the interests of the individual pupil and of society are not in conflict with one another - on the contrary.

The community of the Folkeskole is essential to the pupil's democratic and cultural education and at the same time of great importance for the ability to learn. Because, it is within the social community that the pupils learn. It is through dialogue that information is transformed to insight and knowledge, and through this the pupils learn from each other.

The Folkeskole must be accommodating and versatile. Not by tolerating everything but by offering qualified teaching to all. With increasing demands on learning - and on desiring to learn - throughout life, it becomes even more important to make use of all the children's different abilities and approaches. For the sake of both the boys and the girls, increasing attention should be devoted to the children's physical, practical, and manual approaches to the subjects.

This is not tantamount to giving knowledge and understanding a lower priority. It is a matter of finding various ways of acquiring insight. Everyone needs theories and knowledge to be able to embrace and relate critically to a world which is becoming ever more unpredictable. Otherwise, you have to give up and leave the controls to others.

Therefore, the Folkeskole is not just required to serve as the putty of society. The school of the community also provides the best opportunities for acquiring competence and education that reach beyond mere adjustment to existing conditions. It is our ambition that the pupils should not just do what they are told but rather be able to decide for themselves what should be done - and to act in cooperation with others.

- **The community is essential to the pupils' education and ability to learn.**
- **It is through dialogue that information is transformed to insight and knowledge.**

The Danish Union of Teachers urges that we actively support the Folkeskole as the school of the community.

The politicians in Parliament adopt the general objectives and framework for society's school for all, the Folkeskole. However, the commitment of the local politicians, the teachers, the pupils and their parents are of crucial importance to the dynamics of the school.

The local authorities must demonstrate much more interest in the activities of the schools to ensure local implementation of the ambitions of the Act on the Danish Folkeskole.

Political responsibility requires not only the will to lead. It also requires responsiveness and access to solid specialist knowledge. The politicians' dialogue with the users and employees of the Folkeskole must be guaranteed and systematised. The employees - as well as the pupils and their parents - must be guaranteed influence on their work.

It is necessary to make a clearer distribution of the responsibility between government and local authorities and for the local authorities to increase their commitment.

The Danish Parliament must continue to ensure that the objectives of the Folkeskole remain clear and make sure that the local authorities accept the responsibility for operating and developing the individual school, so that we may still be able to speak of a national Folkeskole in the future.

- **The Danish society must concentrate on the Folkeskole for the sake of the individual as well as the community.**