

Group number: 74

Theme: 11 Role of parents and their participation in school life

Title: Role of parents

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Objective 3.1 Strengthening links with working life and research and society at large

Overall impressions

This visit to Denmark has been rated by the participants as an extremely useful and informative visit, which exceeded everyone's expectations. It was a real rounded adult learning experience which gave people new energy and ideas in working with parents. Right from the very start, a strong connection was established between all of us and we intend that the friendships and spirit of international co-operation will continue. It was certainly a visit with lots of laughter captured in just one or two photos!

The organisation of the visit was excellent. The composition of the group was ideal. We had all the information we needed in plenty of time beforehand. A rich and varied programme of presentations, visits and opportunities for both formal and informal discussions had been organised by Niels Christian Andersen of Skole og Samfund and Ingrid Johansen of Cirius. The content of the programme enabled us to gain a broad understanding of how the Danish educational system actively promotes parental empowerment and co-operation with parents.

Niels and Ingrid were reflective and meticulous in their planning. They ensured that participants had a good balance of activities and opportunities to work and also socialise both formally and informally as well as making sure that they felt 'at home' in Copenhagen. Thank you Niels for introducing us to Copenhagen and Denmark, organising the hotel and tickets for travel, making sure that we got to our destinations in good time and that we had such great lunches! Participants were grateful for the generosity of all the people who gave of their time to ensure that the visit was such a success and met its objective.

Content

The content of the visit was relevant from everyone's point of view. All felt that we had learned things to take back to our own countries and could adapt them to our own contexts. It became apparent to all of us how our educational policies, systems and practices are influenced by the 'deep culture' of each of our own countries. We were presented with a diversity of views which enabled us to get a full, rounded picture of the way Danish school home co-operation works. Participants learned of many practices and ideas which could be applied to their own contexts and systems.

There was a good balance of theoretical and practical activities throughout the week. It helped that the visit began with overviews of the system and philosophy underpinning the partnership working with parents so that all that was seen, heard and learned was contextualised. There were visits to the Ministry of Education, Folkeskoles and the University of Aarhus, opportunities to speak to a wide variety of people as well as hear about the work and practices of bodies such as School Boards, the Parent Counselling Service and, very importantly, Skole og Samfund. It was valuable to hear the views of many stakeholders and see that the belief in the importance of co-operation, partnership and democracy permeates the whole Danish system. This democratic approach was stressed when we met with two student representatives from a School Board who felt that their views really were listened to.

It is clear from everyone that we met that there is a deep commitment to partnership working with all parents in Denmark, that it is a true partnership based on principles of trust and mutual respect and that this commitment is seen throughout the system with government legislation giving a clear lead. We heard this systemic approach to partnership work and empowerment of parents being endorsed by all those to whom we spoke during the course of the visit, ministers, directors, head teachers, School Board members and politicians. It was reassuring to know however that, even though Denmark is aware it has a good system, it recognises that it must adapt to changes in its own society and ensure that schools see things more from the perspective of all parents. The research shared with us at the university showed how a more critical approach to school home co-operation is being taken.

We can see that Danish theory is based in reality and aspects are transferable to all our different contexts and situations. There were several issues, which were most frequently discussed and are mentioned below;

- The most significant of these was, as one participant described it, ‘ the staggering depth of inclusion of parents’ and the opportunities for involvement. For some of us, this just doesn’t happen in our own countries. This is set out clearly in Danish legislation which gives a clear lead. The School Board has a devolvement of responsibility which allows a strong community influence to operate within schools. The membership of the Board is made up of a majority of parents, the president is a parent and students are also members. Most schools also now have parent class contacts and sometimes a Parents’ Council. The range of responsibilities and duties of the Board amazed many of us, for example the Board approving the budget and overseeing the activities of the Folkeskole.
- The responsibility for children and young people’s development, both academically and socially, is shared between parents and the school. Again, government policy and legislation set a clear lead here with the aims of the Folkeskole beginning with ‘ The Folkeskole is, **in co-operation with the parents**, to provide students with the knowledge and skills that will prepare them for further education and training and instil in them the desire to learn more’. This we saw time and time again when we talked with a variety of stakeholders.
- There is a high level of communication between parents and school, formally and informally and a heavy reliance on technology to enhance this such as the use of emails and websites. The use of ICT surprised many of us as, in our own countries, it could not be assumed that all families would have access to computers to ensure effective two way communication.
- How to engage and work with parents who find it harder to access services. The Danish system is working hard to develop this as we all are in our own contexts. There was some feeling in the group that it relates to parents not wishing to take responsibility but this was not a generally held view. The particular difficulties faced by ethnic minority and newly arrived families having particular difficulties were explored on several occasions.

All of us agreed that parental engagement and school home partnership is a good thing and that the status of parents as co-educators is important and of immense ongoing benefit for children. All the research shown in the literature review by Desforges and Abouchaar confirms this. We would all like to include parents as much as possible in school affairs although we recognised that in our own contexts we had different starting points and challenges to overcome. We want parents involved in the successes of their children. The extent to which

this is feasible is the question for each of us in our own contexts. What was recognised by the group was that in Denmark the need to co-operate with parents and the home is enshrined in legislation and is not left to choice or schools responding individually to encouragement.

Common challenges

There were certain common challenges faced by all of us and to varying degrees. We recognised that to encourage all parents to be involved and for services to reach out to parents, more innovative approaches were required and the perspective of the parent needed to be considered far more. We` all faced similar issues caused through globalisation and the migration of people which meant that lots of factors needed to be considered to ensure newly arrived families were also welcomed. Some participants felt there were cultural constraints in engaging with all parents. A shared challenge for all was convincing all parents and pupils of the value of school and the education received there. Several of us felt there were particular challenges in co-operating with parents of children who had more severe behavioural problems so the Family Class that was seen was of particular interest. It was agreed that for change to happen and improvements to be sustained in our own countries in relation to better co operation, clear leadership from government at the macro level and headteachers at the micro level was key as was the time to develop practice.

Issues to explore further:

- Parents as a resource for their child
- Capacity building for parents and other learning opportunities for parents such as language learning, employment skills, family learning
- How to involve parents in school work – more practical ideas and particular projects
- Project on home school communication using new technology. The Internet will be the way forward- the intranet is good as a principle but perhaps could be more interactive- audio as well as written- consider poor literacy skills of parents who would be at a disadvantage
- Consider communication with parents who are not literate
- Person centred planning recently introduced in Danish schools
- Follow up on adaptive tests used in Danish schools
- How to create pride for those being School Board member

There were many examples of good practice;

- Grassroots parents' organisations
- Family Classes. Jan, Ann and Julie from England will ensure that details of this work from the Marlborough Family School in London will be shared with all participants
- Openness
- Respect and true partnership
- Café seminars although we haven't had feedback yet
- Willingness to admit in the Danish system that they haven't all the solutions- very honest
- Positive view of parents and that they are central
- Open discussion with full respect
- Legislation underpinning school- home co-operation but opportunities for schools to interpret this in their own way
- Local democracy underpinning procedures at the municipality level- was a shock to some of us as things in our countries are very centralised
- Individual pupil's plan and agreement of goals together for all pupils not just those with Special Educational Needs. In some countries teachers would probably not accept this because of the workload. Could it be useful for some pupils, not all? The important point is the dialogue between parents and teachers.
- Parents having access to classroom plans
- Close working relationship between civil servants, politicians and school boards
- Opportunities for parents to network, support and learn from one another.

There were many practices which we felt could be transferred in some way to our own countries and contexts. What was important for us was that we recognised we couldn't change things overnight and that we would need to take small steps. These below are just some of the things we mentioned on our last day that we felt we could adopt in some way;

- Emphasis by headteachers and teachers to parents of the importance and responsibility of parents as co-educators and sharing research of its benefits with parents and teachers
- The policy of the municipality having an active role in school affairs
- Involving students even when so young in School Boards and School Councils
- More emphasis on Family Learning opportunities in schools
- City council to work with School Boards
- Café seminars for parents led by parents
- Establish regular, more frequent meetings of the School Board and ensuring that in these there is real discussion not just the receipt of information

- Parent Class contacts and the chance for parents to socialise and form support networks
- Ensuring minutes of school board meetings are accessible to all parents
- Establishing one association for parents which is independent of schools
- Lots of ideas to move on but will need to take small steps
- Project work with parents before children start school, recognising that parents need time to prepare for this transition too
- Schools providing pleasant areas for parents to meet
- Schools to create a welcoming environment
- Capacity building for parents, giving parents understanding and capacity to represent themselves, giving them responsibility to become more active and confident
- Idea of creative networks around children and role of parents in organisation of this - what can we do to help your child succeed.

Visiting the Folkeskoles and talking to students and staff there was a real joy and we had so many ideas to take away from these (not least the folding tables!!). What impressed us was the atmosphere in the schools and the general environment. The schools appeared relaxed and such a welcoming atmosphere prevailed that we could see how parents felt so comfortable in the schools. Also, the way the timetable was organised in one school genuinely shocked many of us because of its democratic approach.

Suggestions

We have just one suggestion which we hope will be considered. As regards the visit itself, we would have found it useful to have time for greater interaction with Danish teachers and parents.

As regards other ideas, the rest is up to us. It will be up to all of us to disseminate and make things go further. We`ll aim to develop collaboration and sincerely hope to meet up at the June 09 conference in Copenhagen.

Thanks again Niels and all your staff, Ingrid, all those with whom Niels set up meetings and to Anna P, Vasiliki, Maria Antoinetta, Roman, Donal, Paco, Abdullah, Danute, Anne, Dorota, Gyorgyi, Anna, Janet, Julie and Gabi. What a wonderful visit and such a great group of people. Thanks all of you for making it such a success and see you soon !