

Citizenship and work/life balance in schools

The Danish Way

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Executive Summary

The aims of my Fellowship are to improve the current citizenship provision for young people in Northern Ireland and to consider how the poor work/life balance of many teachers in Northern Ireland could be ameliorated. During my overseas research in Denmark, I have carried out school visits, class observations, interviews, meetings and surveys to learn about the citizenship programme and its delivery in Denmark and how the Danish Education system promotes and prioritises good work/life balance in schools. The time spent in Denmark allowed me to see in person, the strategies and approaches used in Danish schools. The purpose of my Fellowship is to share my findings with the stakeholders in education in Northern Ireland, to impart the knowledge and expertise I gained and to help review and improve the current citizenship provision for young people and the current work/life balance of teachers in Northern Ireland by adapting some of the Danish methods to the Northern Irish model.

I have worked for 28 years in a large post primary school in Northern Ireland as a History and English subject teacher, in pastoral roles, and as a Head of Key Stage Three. My experiences inside and outside the classroom led me to apply for a Churchill Fellowship in 2023 to try to bring about improvement. I believe a more robust citizenship programme with more effective delivery for young people in Northern Ireland is essential as the current provision for young people is not fit for purpose. The status of citizenship as an educational priority is low, which has significantly impacted attitudes towards it. In addition, as a subject it is not allocated sufficient discrete time on the timetable, it is not embedded in other subjects in the curriculum and these issues combined with the lack of teacher training in this area means that even when updated resources are made available the level of meaningful engagement is still poor.

The concerns about the current citizenship provision for young people are shared by colleagues, students and parents. The need for review has regularly been raised by other stakeholders in Northern Ireland education such as the Youth Assembly Education Committee¹ and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI)². Most recently, Paul Givan, the Minister of Education in Northern Ireland, commissioned a strategic, independent review of the education system and, alongside a number of proposals, significant changes to the current citizenship provision were recommended in the report published in June 2025³ which he has endorsed⁴. Paul Givan also announced in May 2025 that an independent panel is undertaking a review of teacher workload in Northern Ireland⁵ in light of concerns about the Jordanstown Agreement⁶.

As there is widespread recognition of a need for reform in these areas it is time to consider how this can be done. Looking outside Northern Ireland at the approaches

taken by other countries led me to Denmark. The Danish Education system is pioneering in its approach to teaching citizenship and for many decades has had a robust and successful programme with effective delivery which has brought considerable benefits both on an individual and societal level. This approach was formalised in Denmark in an Education Act in 1993 but goes back beyond that date. Citizenship is promoted and celebrated, inside the classroom, with *klassens tid* and it is embedded in all other subjects in the curriculum and outside the classroom with regular events in the school calendar. In Denmark, the attitude towards the importance of teaching citizenship and both personal and social responsibility is completely different. They believe that it is unrealistic and unfair to expect children to come out at the end of their education as well-rounded citizens if they aren't taught how to be empathetic and taught what their role is in society. Young people are encouraged to be curious, and a thirst for knowledge is nurtured by a curriculum which is not content heavy and has much less emphasis on assessments and grading until the age of 16. Improving attitudes to learning in young people in Northern Ireland was explored in the Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland in December 2023⁷ which emphasised the importance of inspiring a love of learning and has suggested adding a fourth objective to the Northern Ireland curriculum ‘*To develop young people as lifelong learners.*’ The top-heavy focus on assessment and grading to the detriment of young people has been raised by teaching unions repeatedly over the last decades.

Denmark has also pioneered good work/life balance for teachers. It is a priority of senior leaders in schools, it is protected by teaching unions, and it is further safeguarded by robust legislation. All of the Danish teachers I spoke with said that they had a good work/life balance. Seeing that this has been achieved and hearing that it is the expectation of teachers in the Danish education system was inspiring.

The findings in the report are presented as analysis and case studies and are captured with reference to attitudes, outcomes, and impact. The key findings focus on the attitudes of key stakeholders in Danish schools, and other groups who are part of the education system. The outcomes of having citizenship as a cornerstone foundation for students, teacher and parents and society and the long-term beneficial impacts of an effective and robust citizenship programme on Danish society. There is also a focus on the success of work/life balance for teachers in Denmark and the high level of public engagement with library services, with particular focus on engagement with young people. Something that was evident in every school that I visited was a genuine love of learning amongst young people. This is something that is often missing in classrooms in Northern Ireland due, in part, to the transactional nature of education which is too closely linked to examinations and grades.

I was inspired and amazed on a daily basis by what I saw in Denmark in classrooms, playgrounds, staff rooms, libraries. And by what I learned from observations of and discussions with students, teachers, pedagogues, senior leaders, student councils, university lecturers, librarians and writers. As a result of these findings, I have a series of recommendations for key stakeholders in the Northern Ireland Education system.

- The Minister of Education and the Department of Education need to raise the status of citizenship as a subject in Northern Ireland and ensure it has its place within the curriculum and that this is reflected in the school timetable. Steps are being taken in this area with Paul Givan's endorsement of the findings of the Strategic Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland of June 2025.³
- A Taskforce of citizenship qualified practitioners needs to be established.
- Teachers delivering the citizenship programme must receive support via regular training and resources and additional time needs to be made available for this.
- The citizenship programme must be delivered to students by teachers who know them and schools should be encouraged to keep the same teacher with a class as they progress through school.
- Students should be encouraged to have an input in the citizenship programme.
- The citizenship programme should be flexible and have the capacity to respond to issues that arise within the class or school context on a bespoke basis.
- The citizenship programme should have a discrete time allocation on the timetable, and citizenship should also be embedded across all subjects. There should be regular citizenship events in the school calendar.
- There should be less emphasis on grading and results to alleviate pressure on young people, teachers and the timetable to facilitate a more robust citizenship programme.
- Curriculum and assessment/examinations should be two separate bodies to ensure high levels of expertise in each area, clearer focus and no clash of priorities.
- There should be legislation and safeguards in place to promote and protect work/life balance.
- More opportunities for mentoring and a volunteering /community programme should be promoted in schools to encourage community spirit and citizenship.
- Post primary links with public libraries should be embedded. Transport for class visits to public libraries for primary and post primary schools should be financed by the Department of Education.

In the long term the impact of these changes will be considerable and should contribute to a societal change in attitude acknowledging the importance of all citizens and the contribution they can and should make to society. As in Denmark, more wage equity and recognition of the importance of all types of employment and the vital role all workers play in our infrastructure on all levels and our economy would also be beneficial.

Chapter 1: Introduction to the project

It is clear from recent reviews in Northern Ireland (and in the UK as a whole) that there is a need for change. The current citizenship programme for young people in Northern Ireland is inadequate. There is considerable evidence for this. Most recently, the independent Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum by Lucy Crehan³, published 3 June 2025, has raised significant concerns about the Northern Ireland Curriculum. As well as other recommendations, significant changes to Learning for Life and Work (LLW) and, in particular, the citizenship provision have been called for. The review states *‘As a result, young people are not being supported to develop as individuals, contributors to the economy and environment, or contributors to society.’*³ And *‘The Review recommends that this Area of learning is disbanded as the ‘brand’ is so damaged.’*³ Paul Givan, Minister for Education in Northern Ireland, had called for the independent review and has since endorsed its findings. *‘The Review and its recommendations provide a comprehensive assessment of our current curriculum and set out a compelling case for change.’*⁴ He has committed to setting up a Curriculum Taskforce to implement the recommendations.

Concerns have already been raised by other stakeholders in the Northern Ireland education system. For example, in the ETI report of 2015 which stated that *‘one third of citizenship and PD lessons in post primary schools were not effective’*² and the SSUNI Let us Learn report of 2023⁸, the Independent Review of Education Investing in a Better Future report of 2023⁵ and the Big Youth Survey 2024 carried out by the Youth Assembly Education Committee¹. Dr Clare McAuley, Lecturer in Education at University of Ulster writes, *‘Citizenship education finds itself teetering on the curriculum precipice and struggling for status and recognition among teachers, parents, and students.’*⁹

This concern about the current provision for young people extends beyond Northern Ireland to the rest of the UK, for example, the House of Lords commissioned a report in 2018¹⁰ which raised significant concerns about the inadequate provision and a follow up report in 2022¹¹ reiterated a number of recommendations and highlighted further concerns. In a debate in the House of Lords on 17 April 2023, Lord Hodgson referred to *‘the increasing neglect of the subject’* and commented on the lack of a stable policy framework and the lack of specific teacher training in the subject. This weakness in the Northern Ireland education system has a significant negative impact, both immediate and long term, on the attitudes and behaviour of young people. Which in turn, has a detrimental impact on families, schools and the wider community. There is overwhelming evidence of a need for change which led me to my Churchill Fellowship and overseas research in Denmark.

In Denmark, the citizenship programme promotes and encourages social responsibility and trust at an individual and societal level. It helps young people to understand their rights and their responsibilities, instils and develops values, fosters empathy and respect for others, encourages social cohesion, and provides opportunities for civic engagement in schools, local communities and beyond.

The Danes have pioneered a different approach for many years and formalised this in legislation in 1993. It seemed likely that there was potentially a great deal that we could learn from them. The crux of the problem in Northern Ireland is the attitude towards Key Stage 3 Learning for Life and Work (and my particular focus is on Personal Development and Local & Global Citizenship). The subject is disliked by many students, who regard it as unimportant, and it is rated as irrelevant by most parents. Dr Clare McAuley writes, *‘It is fair to say that Citizenship should have a curriculum inferiority complex in view of the lack of curriculum space and credibility which it is afforded...As a result a revolving timetable of LLW (of which Citizenship is a component), adds to the perception that Citizenship is not a proper subject and is an “afterthought” and therefore tends not to be taken seriously.’*¹²

Due to the negative attitude towards the subject and the lack of training most teachers do not want to have LLW on their teaching timetable. The outcome of this has been a subject that continues to decline in status. This mindset needs to be changed and the only way this will happen is to review and improve the current programme and support teachers in the delivery of it. We need a modern, relevant, fit for purpose citizenship programme in Northern Ireland (and in the UK as a whole). As shown in Denmark, the importance of an effective citizenship programme and the benefits for the individual, their families and the wider community needs to be promoted and facilitated by the Department of Education in Northern Ireland if there is going to be meaningful change. This will then cascade down to the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), Initial Teacher Education (ITE) course providers and into schools to teachers, students, and parents. As evidenced in Denmark, getting this right is crucial. As well as the beneficial impact on individuals, their family and schools, the societal benefits will also be considerable in relation to increased social responsibility and trust, lower crime levels, and increased levels of happiness and wellbeing.

When I went to Denmark to carry out my research, I was unsure if the reality in schools would match the glowing reports that I had read. It did and much more. I visited a range of different schools – Kindergarten, Folkskole, Gymnasium and International Schools as part of my research.

In Denmark, as well as helping students understand their place in society they focus on the principles of democracy in all their interactions (not just on the political stage). They also teach young people that they won’t always like or agree with everyone and that is okay as long as they interact in a respectful way. In *klassens tid* (class time) empathy is taught as a skill; it is not regarded as a personality trait that you either have or haven’t got. Respect and kindness towards others are innate to their approach. Students enjoy

the classes and regard them as an important part of their educational learning and experience. Teachers enjoy support in delivering a robust and effective programme.

Parents have gone through the same educational process and thus fully support and understand the importance of the programme. The Ministry of Education, school senior leaders and teacher training colleges underscore the importance of an effective citizenship programme in their literature. There are statutory requirements, plentiful resources which are updated regularly and a support team Taskforce (AKT) of qualified practitioners to step in to support teachers and students when the need arises. A love of learning is carefully nurtured and promoted to encourage young people to become lifelong learners.

The attitude to key outcomes is shared across Danish schools – they want young people to be socially responsible, to have high levels of trust, to be creative, collaborative and compassionate. To be curious and have a lifelong love of learning. To have the ability to build social connections and be respectful and inclusive. To be empowered and feel autonomy. To be happy. The two most recent reviews of the education system in Northern Ireland^{3&7} have reinforced the need for improvement in many of these areas and attitudes in schools.

There have been long-term problems with teacher workload in Northern Ireland which Teaching Unions highlighted again recently in discussions with Paul Givan, the Minister of Education. The Minister has acknowledged this, and the Department of Education has since set up an Independent Review of Teachers Workload panel⁵. Teachers often feel overwhelmed with the amount of teaching time, marking and preparation workload. Due to increased financial pressures on schools often the amount of allocated teaching time has increased, further increasing workload. This has led to tensions within the profession and made it more challenging for teachers to find the time to implement new initiatives and cope with heightened demands in an ever-changing profession. This has also impacted on the delivery of the citizenship provision as, combined with the low status of the subject and lack of training outlined above, teachers do not have the time or energy to study and utilise fresh resources as they become available. There is a high rate of burnout and an increase in new teachers leaving the profession after only a few years. This has led to teacher shortages and a degree of apathy from teachers who feel overwhelmed and undervalued.

Denmark has been synonymous with excellent work/life balance, and I was interested to see whether that would also extend to the teaching profession in Denmark where options such as the four-day working week or hybrid working are not compatible with the needs of schools. Again, I was unsure if the reality in schools would match the balance associated with the Danish approach. And again, it did. There is a great deal that Northern Ireland can learn about the working experience of teachers in Denmark.

One of the elements that really stood out for me was the high level of trust in the professionalism and integrity of teachers. So, for example, teachers can carry out their planning and preparation at a time and location of their choice. In short, if they are not

teaching then they can choose to complete their planning, preparation and marking at home or in school.

Finally, while working in public libraries in Northern Ireland (during my career break from teaching to facilitate the overseas learning component of my Churchill Fellowship) I became interested in the levels of citizen engagement with public libraries and the relations between public libraries and schools. UK levels of public engagement with libraries are much lower than their Danish counterparts and there is a stark contrast between the level of engagement in the 16–25 age group in the UK and Denmark.¹³

Northern Ireland has the lowest level of engagement out of the four countries in the UK.¹³ It is clear that Libraries NI strive to promote, maintain and encourage public engagement with library services in many ways and that there are very strong links between public libraries and primary schools. I was interested to learn about the approaches used in Danish public library services, and particularly the strategies of engagement with young people in post primary education. As with their citizenship programme, approach to learning and work/life balance, Denmark has innovative policies and initiatives in place regarding engagement with public libraries that we can learn from.

Chapter 2: Findings – analysis and case studies

There were, of course, many differences in the schools I visited but what struck me most were the similarities. There is strong belief in freedom in Denmark, and this has influenced their approach to education. Students do not wear school uniform; they address their teachers by their first name and there is an informal and relaxed atmosphere in schools and classrooms. Students and staff consistently demonstrated a sense of pride in their school and a sense of responsibility for it, not just responsibility for the infrastructure but the reputation of the school within the local community and beyond. Danes have a flat hierarchy system, and this is the case in schools as well as in the workplace and in society in general. Everyone has a voice and a right to be heard. In schools, this includes students, pedagogues, teachers, parents, all staff and senior leaders. Democratic principles are upheld in classrooms between student and student and student and teacher. These freedoms and democratic approaches are possible in school settings because the system is grounded in respect. There is respect between and within students, teachers, parents and senior leaders.

The schools I visited consistently showed that the Danish education facilitates all of the above by equipping young people with the skills to navigate the demands of social interactions and the pressures of day-to-day life. By instilling values through modelling behaviour and repetition of what is right to influence young people in a positive way. By nurturing the natural curiosity and original thought that all human beings are born with. By encouraging young people to have fun, to fail and to enjoy learning without the pressures of high volumes of homework and high-stake assessments/examinations. By fostering a positive attitude to focused and productive learning.

The Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland of 2023 concluded that, *‘Education should be viewed as a journey of value in itself and not just a route to a specific end or qualification... Schooling needs to instil a love of learning that lasts a lifetime.’*⁷ This is what Denmark has been able to achieve.

In Denmark on National Day of Wellbeing, the first Friday in March each year, students complete a survey which focuses on their mental health and level of wellbeing. In the survey, the students can also make suggestions about areas they feel that they as individuals and their class would benefit from support in. The students have anonymity but the results for each school are published and accessible to all. If individual schools have concerns about their students due to the results of the survey or certain elements that they want to investigate further, then they can request a bespoke follow-up survey six months later in order to gauge whether there has been improvement, which demonstrates the strong focus on wellbeing. Academic result statistics are published

annually, and the wellbeing results are regarded as equally important by schools, by students and by parents, as well as the wider community.

Danes have words that don't easily translate into English, probably the most well-known is *hygge* but there are a number that are linked closely to education and young people which I have referenced in the case studies below. The word '*Tillid*' was synonymous with each school that I visited. It is a combination of the English words trust and faith, and in my opinion, this word summarises the Danish Way.

Case study 1

Frederiksberg Gymnasium, Copenhagen

In Frederiksberg Gymnasium, I observed citizenship lessons and spoke to teachers. I had meetings with the vice principal, Anders Jacobsen, and other citizenship, social studies and class teachers, and with the Student Council. Students and the teachers from the lessons I attended completed anonymous online surveys. The students are aged 16–19 years old.

Attitudes – the school follows '*The Competent Citizenship Programme*'.¹⁵ The senior leadership, the staff and the students I spoke to all underlined the importance of ensuring that students learn to become 'competent citizens' during their time at Frederiksberg Gymnasium. The focus is on developing students who can make a difference in society. They achieve academic development and engagement in school through active work with inclusive communities, study programmes, guidance, counselling services, events, study tours and excursions. However, learning to be a competent citizen is the most important educational outcome and is regarded as the bedrock of the school. The programme builds upon the citizenship work done in their previous educational setting but also lays life changing foundations going forward.

The leadership team regularly evaluate and use teacher and student feedback to review their programme to ensure that young people are given the best opportunities to become competent citizens. They engage with other schools, most recently in Norway and Sweden, to share good practice and gain more insights. Despite the challenges, they have intentionally included controversial topics as part of the programme as they believe they are doing a disservice to their students by not discussing sensitive issues which could help them navigate things better in the future. There are 12 competencies that all students must sign up to¹⁵ and all teachers are involved in delivering the Citizenship Programme. Attendance and active participation in school events are expected of students and staff. There is a positive attitude to work/life balance and a sense of its importance. The professionalism of teachers in the school is trusted and highly regarded. As with all Danish schools, teachers only need to be in school when they are timetabled to teach. Planning, preparation and marking can be done at a time and location of their choosing. The school also strives to give each member of staff one day off per fortnight when they can work at home.

Outcomes – students play an active role in school life and decision making. Student Voice is encouraged and heard with an active Student Council which is student run by candidates voted in by students. The Council focuses on student duties and student rights. They uphold the importance of students giving and gaining. They also take the upholding of work/life balance for students seriously. There is also a Student Board which is made up of students, teachers, and representatives from universities and industries. And there are a range of student committees focusing on key issues/areas, for example, climate, AI and school assemblies. *Fællessang* (communal singing) is a big part of Danish culture and regarded as an opportunity to promote unity and growth. One teacher mentioned, *‘Our study tours and morning assemblies are inspired by the Danish folk high school (højskole) tradition with community singing and more.’*

The two main teaching committees are the Pedagogical Committee (pedagogical and didactic development) and the Events Committee (all activities that go beyond teaching). They believe in the importance of discussing controversial topics to equip young people to navigate inequality, discrimination and to be aware of their own potential bias. There are a series of ‘controversial lessons’ that students will cover in each year group. One teacher wrote in their survey, *‘At our school the students go through different types of projects over the three years that focus on preparing them for the world around them. It could be working with an NGO or being able to debate in a civilised manner when talking about rather controversial and difficult topics like racism, crisis of masculinity, sexism, loneliness etc. (based on anonymised cases from the students themselves in a survey). Furthermore, the students are encouraged to sit in and perhaps form their own school committees of various sort and to do voluntary work. Also, inside the classroom we try to focus on individual responsibility and awareness of being part of a larger whole, both in the subjects we teach and the way we make the students work.’*

For teachers there is better work/life balance. Teaching staff are of course busy, but they are committed and involved in school life and feel valued and recognised. They are appreciative of the efforts to help their work/life balance. There was an after-school event the day of my visit. It was called *Syng- Spis -Snak* (which means Sing-Eat-Talk) for the students and staff. Parents were welcome at the event and there was a musical performance afterwards to allow older students to practise their exam pieces in front of an audience.

Impact – Frederiksberg Gymnasium is a highly successful and well-respected school. They are oversubscribed and have many students from across Denmark. There is high morale amongst the staff I spoke to who have the energy and time to reflect, evaluate and to strive for improvement. The staff I spoke to said that the influence of education on the attitudes and behaviour of young people is significant and they believe that their citizenship programme is effective. One teacher commented, *‘We are open and at eye-level with our students, and we aim at making the students not only qualified in narrow subjects but as persons and future citizens together with the rest of us.’*

The impact on young people is immeasurable. I felt like I was engaging with future leaders – young people who are balanced, articulate, confident and kind. Students who are proud of their school and what it stands for. 100% of the students who completed the online survey said that *klassens tid* in Folkskole was important. They also believed in the importance of social responsibility; 60% said social responsibility was important, 33% said it was quite important and 7% were neutral. When asked if school had influenced their attitude to social responsibility 73% said yes, 26% said maybe and 1% said no. The main influences on their attitudes and behaviour were family 31%, friends 31%, school 26%, the media 9% and celebrities 2% and football 1%.

Conclusion – the potential gains for education in Northern Ireland from following a similar programme are clear. Students from Northern Ireland who completed the anonymous online survey also recognise the importance of social responsibility with 25% regarding it as important, 46% quite important, 28% neutral and 1% saying it was unimportant. The figures on the importance of social responsibility are not as high as Frederiksberg Gymnasium but still important to young people, and therefore the Northern Ireland Education system has a duty to equip and help guide them to become socially responsible citizens. What stood out for me most about this school is that despite the significant successes and effectiveness of the current citizenship programme, the senior leadership team and the teaching staff are constantly reviewing and striving for improvement. They work tirelessly to identify and address weaknesses or shortcomings in the school citizenship provision. They are their own biggest critics and ensuring students have the best opportunities to become competent citizens is at the centre of everything.

Case study 2

Bernadotteskolen International Department, Hellerup

In Bernadotteskolen International Department I observed lessons and also attended a collapsed timetable theme day of project-based learning. I had a number of meetings with Alastair Robertson, the Coordinator of the International Department, and talked more informally with teaching staff and students. Staff and students completed online surveys. The students are 6–16 years old.

Attitudes – there is one school rule in Bernadotteskolen, ‘*to show consideration*’ and the Danish word *dannelse* encapsulates the ethos of the school. *Dannelse* is a Danish word which doesn’t translate easily into English. It is the process of becoming a cultured and well-developed individual through education, social interaction and the cultivation of character. It is closely linked to *bildung*, the combination of the education and knowledge necessary to thrive in your society and the moral and emotional maturity to both be a team player and have personal autonomy. Alastair Robertson was inspiring, and his vision has influenced how the Department has developed. To exemplify, he drew a Venn diagram with three circles, one had the phrase academic learning, one the word collaboration and the other said creativity. He said that when all three circles overlap

then the core objective of the lesson has been achieved. The small team of staff members work well and play to each other's strengths.

The work/life balance of staff is important to the senior leadership team. The young people I observed in lessons and spoke to were positive and curious. They enjoy lessons and love "P" time (which stands for project-based lessons) when they work with students from different classes. Students from 6–16 are responsible on a rota basis for cleaning and tidying their classroom, looking after their own property, emptying the bin and looking after the plants etc. There are separate rooms to facilitate the project-based learning lessons with specialist teachers – clay, sewing, art, 'fine art', metal and wood, drama, music, and cookery. And a 'Lille P' room for the younger students for project-based learning.

Outcomes – active learning, encouraging creativity and helping young people to navigate into adulthood, as well as equipping them with the skills to be well rounded citizens, is of immense importance to senior leaders and teaching staff. One teacher described how they promote citizenship, *'Informally by encouraging collaboration and fellowship in myriad activities both inside and outside the classroom and across the different grades and ages. Formally – by organising theme weeks where the students work in different constellations and work on their chosen topics such as the UN, Aspects of the Environment, the Ocean ... Setting up friendship classes where children from younger classes are buddied with older children.'* Peer mentoring and mentoring of younger children is intrinsic to the school approach. The lessons I observed were interesting, interactive and informal. Every student I spoke to had a love of learning and curiosity about everything which was beautiful to see.

Students' work and creativity is focused on real outcomes – their artwork decorates the building, they do podcasts, write and publish a newspaper and compile photography books. I observed ordinary timetabled classes and a collapsed theme day of project work, focusing on art (these are in addition to the project-based timetables classes). The art created on the theme day is being used to decorate the school building. The students were working in groups from age 6–16. They worked collectively as teams on ideas and discussion and then some groups worked individually on their piece of work and other groups worked together to produce one large piece. They painted pictures, made a collage, made papier-mâché masks and papier-mâché mackerel to swim along the wall.

On both days that I visited the atmosphere was relaxed and friendly but also focused, calm and productive. The enjoyment of staff and students was a pleasure to witness. Academic learning, collaboration and creativity was evident in every classroom. In Bernadotteskolen, stakeholders have a voice. There is an active Student Council which meets every month, and the young people I spoke to feel heard. Teachers are represented on the Steering Group and there are regular meetings. There seemed to be an open-door management policy in the International Department for staff to speak to Alastair and he was very much part of the team. The pedagogues play a very important role and are regarded as members of staff alongside teachers. There is a Parent Council

which meets four times per year, and parents are encouraged to feel part of school life. Parents were very visible in morning times and at the end of the school day. Parents are invited regularly to the school for events, food and a chance to talk to teachers and other students.

Impact – Bernadotteskolen International Department has an excellent reputation in Hellerup and is heavily oversubscribed. From the teachers I surveyed, 100% believe their school has an effective citizenship programme. They are committed to their job and whilst, at times, they can feel under pressure they believe in what they are doing.

One teacher described the biggest strength of their school as, ‘*We consider the whole child – not only measuring and testing key subject skills but equal focus and sense of priority on what would be considered citizenship – dannelse.*’ Teachers feel heard and trusted, and they can complete their planning, preparation and marking at home and this eases the pressures of the busy school week. Their survey results showed they believe they have a good work/life balance.

The students are well rounded, confident, articulate, with pride and a feeling of belonging in their school. Teachers and students have a sense of community and a sense of responsibility to the school and each other. 100% of the students surveyed believed social responsibility was important and 100% believed school had influenced their attitude towards social responsibility. Students have been given the gift of a nurtured lifelong love of learning which they will take with them when they leave Bernadotteskolen. There is experience of and belief in the effectiveness of democracy through collaboration and negotiation. Student work/life balance is also regarded as important. Relations between senior leaders, teachers, pedagogues, students and parents seem to be strong and focused on the same goals.

Conclusion – there is much to be learned from Bernadotteskolen International Department about fostering good relations with parents. About the concept of *dannelse* and ensuring that everyone in the school community feels heard. About being flexible in the use of curriculum time and focusing on the whole school experience and the importance of an effective citizenship programme. It was here I witnessed at first hand the difference between the transactional attitude to learning that we have instilled in young people in Northern Ireland which stifles their natural curiosity and love of learning and the Danish system which stimulates curiosity and instils a lifelong love of learning. This is something we need to attempt going forward.

Case study 3

Skt Josef’s Folkskole, Danish and International Department, Roskilde

In Skt Josef’s I visited the Danish and International Departments and I observed *klassens tid* and PSHE lessons and met with senior leaders and class teachers. I returned to the Danish Department two weeks later to observe a second *klassens tid*

lesson. Staff and students completed anonymous online surveys. The students are 6–16 years old.

Attitudes – both the Danish and International Departments shared the same attitude to citizenship. The Danish Department follows the Danish Ministry of Education curriculum with a weekly *klassens tid* class, citizenship is embedded in the curriculum and citizenship events are held throughout the school year. The staff commented on the numerous excellent resources provided by government organisations and other nongovernment organisations, such as the Queen Mary Foundation,¹⁶ the Røde Kors,¹⁷ Børns Vilkår,¹⁷ and the LEGO Foundation.¹⁹ These online resources include PowerPoints, role plays, case studies, interactive worksheets, videos, quizzes etc. The same class teacher takes the students for *klassens tid* from age 6–11 and the pedagogue team teaches with the class teacher. The senior leadership team trialled a period without *klassens tid* on the timetable to better gauge what role it played in promoting better relations and citizenship.

The negative impact was significant, in particular, some of the younger students struggled to navigate relations with each other and found it more difficult to resolve their differences. At times, tensions between students had an impact on learning spilling over into classes, most often after lunch break, as the students did not have a forum to discuss and navigate difficulties in the safe setting of *klassens tid*. It was added back on the timetable and the importance it played had been clearly demonstrated.

The International Department follows the Cambridge International Education curriculum and has introduced an approach named ‘character’ which has nine character-values/traits which they describe as a specific set of skills for students to use, focus on and master in order to become better learners and citizens. The character values are Grit/Growth Mindset/ Optimism/ Zest/ Self-control/ Curiosity/ Purpose/ Gratitude and Social/Emotional Intelligence. In the online survey, one class teacher said, ‘*We build our curriculum around the nine character traits that hang in the back of our classroom. We use these character traits schoolwide and it has become part of our daily vocabulary.*’

Staff in both departments agree on the importance of citizenship, equipping young people with the skills to be active and responsible citizens. *Fællesskab* is the word that one member of the International Department used to describe their approach. This is another Danish word which does not have a simple English translation – it encompasses a spirit of community, a sense of unity, togetherness and fellowship. The work/life balance of teachers is important in both departments.

Outcomes – the importance of the citizenship provision in Skt Josef’s is demonstrated by the curriculum time devoted to it. Their commitment is evidenced by the values they uphold and the planning, time and reflection that goes into the citizenship programmes in the two departments. In the International Department, students have two PSHE lessons per week as well as three Global Citizenship lessons per week. The Global Citizenship lessons have recently been extended to include digital literacy. The

International Department encourages teachers to follow a project-based approach to delivering the curriculum, usually in 4 or 6-week blocks, and to utilise opportunities to incorporate citizenship teaching.

Students in the Danish Department follow the Danish programme and their citizenship provision is excellent, providing numerous opportunities to engage with the core concepts of empathy, collaboration, democracy, creativity, autonomy and respect to help foster a high level of social responsibility and trust amongst young people.

One teacher wrote on the online survey about *klassens tid*, ‘*It is such an important time of the week both for the students and the teacher. It gives all an opportunity to step up and reflect on the values within the school, dealing with conflicts, teaching how to move on, to show respect, kindness, tolerance, being a good friend, making cases, role plays etc. to view different perspectives. If you do this on a weekly basis in a safe environment as a classroom should be, the impact is significant. The students learn not only more about themselves but also about being in a community.*’

They follow four-week themes in the citizenship programmes – empathy was the theme during my visits and the empathy lessons were engaging and enjoyable. The team teaching between the pedagogue and class teacher worked well. In their surveys, students assessed their level of participation, and it is apparent that students enjoy the lessons and are keen to contribute. The lessons are interactive with students moving to different demarcated areas in the room to indicate their opinions on different questions and scenarios, sometimes giving their own opinion or how they imagine another person might feel in a situation. There was plenty of movement without fuss and a calm and focused atmosphere. The student responses demonstrated a high level of emotional intelligence for their age; they had an understanding of more complex emotions and were able to express their views in an articulate way. There was a music video focusing on kindness and a short cartoon on the impact of actions on others.

There is a Children’s Council and a Student Council which meets every other month. They have a Student Council Day each year. Parents are involved in school life; many parents attended the school as pupils and are keen to volunteer to help at events.

Impact – Skt Josef’s school is regarded with pride by the community in Roskilde and students and staff feel the same sense of responsibility and pride in their school as I saw in all the schools I visited. The atmosphere in the classrooms I visited was warm and friendly. The student/teacher relationship is strong and there is shared sense of purpose and focus. The students show curiosity and a thirst for knowledge. In one class students were studying the legendary tale of Finn MacCool and the ‘salmon of knowledge’²⁰. The students were asked if they would eat the ‘salmon of knowledge’ and I expected them all to say ‘yes’ for an easy route to wisdom. The majority of students said ‘no’ for various reasons; there would then be no new learning to look forward to, they would lose interest in the things and people around them, there would be no point coming to school and they would lose their curiosity. This underlines the love of learning

that has been encouraged in the school. (Although, one forward-thinking student did say he would freeze it and then eat it just before an important job interview.)

100% of the teachers surveyed said they believe the education system has a significant influence on the attitudes and behaviour of young people and 100% believed that their school had an effective citizenship programme. 100% said they had good work/life balance which they felt was protected by their school and by trade unions. They also commented on the benefits of manageable class sizes of 22–26 students per class and the freedom of deciding when to complete their planning, preparation and marking. Some flagged up pressures coming from parental demands but felt supported by senior leaders in responding to those. In the anonymous online survey, 90% of students polled believed that citizenship lessons are important or quite important, with 10% neutral.

Conclusion – there is much to be learned from Skt Josef’s. When students in Skt Josef’s were asked how much they enjoyed citizenship lessons the score was 4.32 out of 5 compared to 2.28 out of 5 in a similar age group polled in a school in Northern Ireland. Results for the crucial question about how much what they discuss and learn in citizenship classes influenced their attitudes and behaviour are telling. 11% of Skt Josef’s students said they were always influenced, 63% said frequently, 23.5% said sometimes and 2.5% said rarely. Not one student in Skt Josef’s said they were never influenced by their citizenship lessons. This contrasts strongly with the NI results with zero students always being influenced, 10% frequently influenced, 24% sometimes, 63% rarely and 5% never. This says a great deal in terms of the missed opportunity to be an influence for positive change in the lives of young people in Northern Ireland. In addition, when students were asked how they would describe the lessons, 59% of the Skt Josef’s students describing their citizenship lessons used the word ‘fun’ and no student used the word ‘boring’. 29% of the students polled in Northern Ireland used the word ‘boring’ to describe their LLW lessons and only one student used the word ‘fun’, which underlines the issues with the current provision.

Case study 4

International School of Billund (ISB), Billund

My visit to the International School of Billund was different to my other school visits, as they are such a unique school, and they have frequent visitors and conduct tours. Rather than classroom observations, I completed an individual tour of the school with Sille Aarlit Jensen, Communications Manager, had a meeting with Idah Khan O’Neill, Research Co-ordinator, and a brief conversation with the Head of School, Camilla Uhre Fog. I got to see students around the school and was able to go in and out of classrooms to get an insight into the workings and enjoy the atmosphere. I attended the online annual Pedagogy of Play Conference hosted by ISB in May 2025.

The school was established in 2013 with 60 students at Kindergarten and Primary level. Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen from the LEGO Foundation put forward the idea of establishing an

International School in Billund based on the idea of learning through play. *‘Part of the school’s vision is that we must stay curious for life – and be lifelong learners. To the benefit of society. To the benefit of all.’* (Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen)²¹. In 2015 the school began a collaboration with the LEGO Foundation¹⁹ and Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education²² to develop a key foundation of the school, the Pedagogy of Play, known as PoP.

Attitudes – the school mission statement is, *‘By placing PLAY at the heart of education, ISB stimulates every child’s natural desire to LEARN.’*²¹ This message is reinforced with repetition of the words PLAY and LEARN in signs and images around the school. The vision is, *‘To cultivate a community of lifelong learners who will create a better world with courage, compassion and curiosity.’*²¹ Both the mission statement and the vision reiterate the importance of encouraging these young people to keep that curiosity and love of learning which is innate to us all but can be stifled or suffocated by pressure and overwhelming volumes of information. The Danes have two words for play: *lege* which is playing in a free and imaginative way focusing on creativity and *spille* which is more organised, structured play with rules/regulations such as sport, chess or a board game. Both are regarded as important to development and *lege* is of particular importance. *Leg Godt* (play well) is where the LEGO name came from. Play lies at the heart of the ISB.

When I arrived at reception, alongside the Mission and Vision statements were further insights into school attitudes. Painted on the wall are the words: *‘We teach children how to think. Not what to think.’* Also: *‘The school you wish you’d gone to is here. Too bad for you. Great for your kids.’* I liked the humour of this but also the clear messaging that this school takes pride in its approach to education. Students had made a collage with the words, *‘An inclusive community is built through compassion and understanding.’*

Fun, active learning, curiosity, creativity and kindness are at the heart of this school. The Venn diagram that the ISB uses has Choice, Wonder and Delight in the three circles and when the three circles overlap in a lesson then the goal of playful learning has been achieved. The school also supports the United Nations interconnected Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)²³ and the 17 goals are on prominent display and influence the school approach and attitudes. The Unit of Inquiry must relate back to one or more of the SDGs. The school participates in Mini Model United Nations. In October each year the school celebrates UN day. Helping young people to understand citizenship and become good citizens is emphasised everywhere.

Outcomes – the values of the school are clear: for students to be empowered to lead their own learning and to build a culture of collaborative learning. To promote experimentation and risk taking and, at times, learn through failure and error. To encourage imaginative thinking. To be involved in the creation of community rules and behaviour expectations. Students are given an ever-increasing level of responsibility as they progress throughout the school. There is a Student Council which meets twice a month, two students from each class are elected on to the Council by their peers. The school uses social training and conflict resolution programmes and is involved with the

local community. There are wellbeing teachers who work with students, staff and parents.

A Parents' University was established in 2014 as a forum for parents to gain a better understanding of learning through play while engaging in the development of ISB. *'The format of the Parents' University has changed over the years, but the goal is always open dialogue, knowledge-sharing, common understanding, and common knowledge.'*²¹ Parents have representation on the ISB School Board and on the Kindergarten School Board.

The school follows the International Baccalaureate, a robust, rigorous and respected education programme. The school performs well in this programme so they do have to focus on knowledge, content and skills, but this is done through play. The timetable is structured around the Unit of Inquiry model with other subjects such as Visual Arts, PE, Danish, Music and Drama also included. As well as learning through play, there is specific play time in the timetable for Primary Years (6–12 years old) students. There is a practical approach to encourage self-reliance – all the equipment and resources are at child height so children can get what they need themselves. As well as the many play areas there are books everywhere, and lots of pods and little nooks for children to go to read, play or have quiet time. The school also promotes *Fællessang* and regular communal singing is part of the school experience. Whole School Assembly is essential to the school's community and culture. As well as singing, there is dancing, music and student presentations.

The school describes itself as a *'what if'* school and a key question is always *'what if we try this...'* just as they encourage young people to experiment and try different things, they are willing to do the same and learn from that. Staff meetings model the same approach to playful learning. There are also teacher and pedagogue study groups and staff can opt to be a researcher, a practitioner, or a member of the PoP culture group. They can change their role at any time to try something different, but it means they are still learning and developing professionally and collaborating with colleagues. Each week, teachers and pedagogues have time in their timetable to document practice and to research and discuss with colleagues in their study groups and then all the study groups meet twice a year to share good practice and ideas going forward. A book club open to all staff meets eight times per year for professional discussion on books, research articles or TED talks. There is an annual PoP celebration for the School Board, Kindergarten Board, students and staff to come together and celebrate. Regarding work/life balance one teacher who came from England said that in England she had 40 lesson blocks per week, 37 were spent teaching with 3 remaining for everything else. In ISB, she got the chance to take a step back and really experience the joy of teaching.²¹

Impact – the ISB has many international connections and Research Coordinator, Idah Khan O'Neill, is the main school link with international collaborators. ISB inspires other countries via the Harvard Graduate School of Education in, for example, South Africa, USA and South America. In addition, ISB constantly shares knowledge and expertise with the many guests who visit the school and via networks and conferences. In 2020, ISB and LEGO foundation established a network of schools that are working with playful

learning which includes teachers from schools in Scotland, Canada, the Netherlands and Switzerland.

Since 2023, the ISB has hosted an annual online PoP Conference with 10,000 digital participants. I was fortunate enough to attend the 2024 conference. The workshops were inspiring and informative. The workshops led by the ISB staff and also staff from other schools who have introduced ISB ideas and initiatives into their school and are sharing the impact of this with others. This domino sharing effect can only be of benefit to education on a global scale. I learned about new approaches and methodologies from the Conference, and one that stands out is how, in the ISB, some classes are set based on the student's thinking style. This has been piloted in English classes and young people are assessed on their thinking style to help decide what teaching style would suit them best. Whilst thinking styles aren't binary, everyone has a preference. The categories are concrete, abstract and 'abcrete' (a combination of the two). Teachers are also categorised into thinking styles as they often favour this in their approach to teaching. Thus, students benefit from being taught in the way that suits 'what if...' their thinking style best. This has been a great success and is another example of the approach of the ISB.

The impact of the school on students, staff and the wider community in Billund has been significant. The expectation was that school numbers would reach 120 by 2025, instead the school has 550 students and a staff of 120 and has no available student spaces until 2027. Billund has a population of approximately 6,000. A quarter of the students are Danish and three quarters are international students (a third of students are linked to the LEGO company.) A former student who graduated in 2023 said, *'At ISB I learned to be more creative in my thinking... I became better at visualising solutions... I became more curious about a lot of things, including my own learning style.'*²¹

Conclusion – when we read the feedback from students, the impact of their time at ISB on their learning and their future has been positive and significant. Camilla Uhre Fog, Head of School encapsulates this with the words, *'My deepest wish is that when students leave ISB, what they carry with them is an unwavering curiosity and lifelong love of learning. Then I will know we have succeeded.'*²¹

Sille Aarlit Jensen, Communications Manager, said to me on my visit, *'We can only learn when we thrive, so we need to thrive first.'* From what I observed on my visit and the school's success in the International Baccalaureate confirms that young people in the International School of Billund are thriving. The fact that student wellbeing is so important in Denmark and that this is strongly reflected in the approach taken in the ISB is key to their success and the positive impact they have. There is much that we can learn from the ISB in Northern Ireland and their generous approach to sharing good practice and their knowledge and expertise is inspiring. During my visit they offered to host a visit to our Minister of Education so he can see what they do in practice.

Case study 5

Ny Hollænderskolen Folkskole, Copenhagen

On my visit to Ny Hollænderskolen I observed *klassens tid* lessons with some older students and had a meeting and a tour of the school with the school principal, Kristian Lohmann. The students are 6–16 years old.

Attitudes – the school has a structured approach to *klassens tid*. Each class has one 45-minute lesson per week taken by the class teacher who knows the students well. The same class teacher takes the class grades 1–5 and then a new class teacher grades 6–9. The class teacher can have a second *klassens tid* lesson in the week if they feel it is needed. Beginning teachers do not have *klassens tid* on their timetable, they are given time to learn about the school, be trained in the school approach and get to know the students before being asked to deliver the programme. Sometimes two teachers will team teach the lesson and there are specialist staff within the school and outside the school who can come and help with a class which needs additional support. There is a positive attitude towards *klassens tid* amongst staff and students. Parents are also positive and recognise the numerous benefits. Work/life balance is regarded as particularly important, and the principal works hard with staff to ensure they are happy with their timetable. While it is the right of senior leaders to introduce new initiatives and to want change there is recognition that collaboration is crucial and achieving consensus is the way to ensure that initiatives are successful.

Outcomes – the school is spacious, bright, airy and litter free. There is a friendly and relaxed atmosphere in classrooms, the staff room and around the school. During break and lunch times young people relax inside in pods and larger seating areas, they can play music or board games or just chat. Outside there are ball games and play equipment. The school has a *klassens tid* programme which all staff are trained in and a specification that all classes follow. Specialist teachers are brought in to train class teachers in the delivery of the programme. These specialist teachers also trained a number of Ny Hollænderskolen teachers to share good practice with any new teachers who joined the school to ensure the approach remains consistent. One teacher said, ‘*I think klassens tid plays an important role showing the pupils democracy. It can also help build an informal student–teacher relationship and increase pupil motivation because of increased ownership.*’

Citizenship and democracy are the most important aspects of school life and are embedded in the curriculum across all subjects in conjunction with the *klassens tid* programme. There are regular events in the school year to promote citizenship and social responsibility. For example, a Community and Social week when the timetable is collapsed and there is a whole week of activities for the entire school. There is a similar event to mark the start of Christmas celebrations on the 1 December when students work with students across all year groups and with different teachers. The school also promotes *Fællessang* and the whole school body meets at least once a month to sing together.

The school also takes part in an annual Conference in the Frederiksberg Municipality. Students speak at the Conference about how important *klassens tid* is to them and the high value they place on it. This involves collaboration with nine other schools and is an opportunity for students, teachers, senior leaders, School Board members, politicians, the mayor and representatives of key industries to talk about what is important to them and to share ideas and collaborate. On the National Day of Wellbeing, there are a series of wellbeing activities, and a different school theme is explored each year. Parents receive an online weekly plan from the school, so they are fully informed about events and activities. The school consults with parents about their children's learning and encourages parental involvement.

Impact – the school performs well in terms of academic results and in the National Student wellbeing survey. They take student wellbeing seriously and strive to ensure that the citizenship programme is robust, consistent and fit for purpose. In the lessons I observed the students were respectful and listened to the views of others. They were confident and articulate in communicating their own views and the vast majority of students contributed to class discussion. They had the emotional maturity to accept that someone might have a different view from theirs. There was discussion about a range of matters – the student room cleaning rota, their summer party, their class trip and then some whole school matters like what time they thought the school day should start and end. Students felt comfortable enough to be open in the discussion. There were differences of opinion on the start and end times of the school day, and I was really impressed with how they dealt with the differing views of others and then how they all accepted the majority decision in the vote at the end.

In the anonymous online survey 21% of students said *klassens tid* is important, 68% said it was quite important and 11% were neutral. They all agreed that they get to have a say in what is discussed during *klassens tid* (58% yes and 42% sometimes) and they all contribute to the discussion (37% always and 63% sometimes). They rated their overall level of enjoyment of *klassens tid* as 4.37/5. 11% of students said they were always influenced in their attitudes and behaviours by what had been discussed and learned in *klassens tid*, 52% were frequently influenced and 37% sometimes. No student said they were rarely or never influenced by what they discussed and learned. The words they used to describe the subject were 'useful', 'relevant', 'nice', 'helpful' and 'fun'. Teacher wellbeing and good work/life balance are also important to senior leaders.

When asked how he achieved good work/life balance one teacher said, '*I am a member of a teacher union that has negotiated the structural conditions, and my employer is very influential in helping me achieve this.*' Dealing with conflicts with parents and how important it was to have the support of senior leadership when dealing with this was noted. They also commented on their level of autonomy in the classroom and had a positive opinion of the informal classroom atmosphere and praised how students are encouraged to be critical thinkers.

Conclusion – I asked a group of students in Northern Ireland of similar age (14 years old) to the class I observed to complete the same anonymous, online survey focusing on the Personal Development and Local & Global Citizenship components of LLW. The contrasts with their Danish counterparts were quite significant. 46% regarded LLW as unimportant, whereas not a single student from Ny Hollænderskolen regarded *klassens tid* as unimportant. Only 3% of Northern Ireland students surveyed regarded LLW as important and 6% as quite important (totalling 9%), contrasting with 21% and 68% respectively in Ny Hollænderskolen (totalling 89%). This says a great deal about the very different attitudes of young people of similar ages in the two countries. When asked how much they enjoyed LLW, the score was 2.42 out of 5, again contrasting with the 4.37 out of 5 for *klassens tid* in Ny Hollænderskolen.

When the students I surveyed in Northern Ireland were asked how much what they discussed and learned in LLW, focusing on the Personal Development and Local and Global Citizenship components, had an influence on their attitudes and behaviour, 0% said always, 6.4% said frequently, 29.1% said sometimes, 48.4% said rarely and 16.1% said never. In the Ny Hollænderskolen student survey 11.4% said always, 52% said frequently and 36.4% said sometimes. No student said they were rarely or never influenced by what they had learned and discussed which compares with 64.5% of students surveyed in Northern Ireland. Whilst this can only be a snapshot, it indicates wasted opportunities to have a positive and meaningful impact on students' attitudes and behaviour in Northern Ireland. I think there is much that we can learn from Ny Hollænderskolen's approach to equipping young people to be socially responsible and compassionate citizens. The two test groups had relatively similar results in the survey regarding how much they were influenced by family, friends, media and celebrities.

Young people in Northern Ireland believe that social responsibility is important, but it would seem they are not being equipped with the skills and given the same opportunities for learning as their Danish counterparts. With the test group of similar age in Northern Ireland, 26% said that social responsibility was important to them, 42% said it was quite important, 29% felt neutral and only 3% felt it was unimportant. This tells us that most young people in Northern Ireland would value being helped to navigate their way to being socially responsible citizens.

Chapter 3: Beyond the classroom

During my time in Denmark, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to visit Copenhagen University and a number of libraries. I also met with Kay Xander Mellish from the US who has lived in Denmark for twenty years. Kay is an author of a number of books, such as *How to Live in Denmark*²⁴ and *How to Work in Denmark*²⁵. Kay also has a podcast, also called *How to Live in Denmark*²⁶, which explores many aspects of Danish culture and attitudes from someone living in Denmark but with American insights. I also met with Sam Floy who co-hosts the podcast *What the Denmark*²⁷. Sam is from the UK, he has travelled widely, and he now lives with his Danish wife in a *bofællesskab* near Roskilde, a unique Danish system which translates as *an intentional community* – when a group of people intentionally create and live in a community space. There are quite a number of *bofællesskab* in Denmark. I learned a great deal about Danish attitudes from the individuals I spoke to and again could clearly see how attitudes, outcomes and impact are closely linked.

I spent a wonderful and informative afternoon with Professor Marie Højlund Roesgaard from Copenhagen University who has worked closely with a number of schools in Denmark and Japan on their global citizenship programme. She has studied global citizenship and as an expert in Japanese culture she has completed much research comparing the approaches to teaching citizenship in the two countries.

We discussed how there is an attitude of trust towards young people in Denmark, that they are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning and given choice. They are not left to navigate life schools alone and their opinions are respected. Marie noted the acceptance of Danes that someone might have a different opinion to them. They don't try to change that opinion or resolve the difference they can simply accept that the person has a different perspective and move on. If a decision has to be made, then they respect the decision of the majority. Interestingly, with regard to the Danish attitude towards work/life balance, Marie mentioned that in the 1980s Denmark got caught up in 'yuppie' culture and subscribed to the view that long working hours equated to a better, more successful employee. But she has witnessed a shift in mindset in the last 30–35 years partly due to trade union actions and also because Danish people recognised the importance of family life and work/life balance. And they have never looked back. The outcome is that not only has the mindset shifted, it has flipped over to the opposite viewpoint. The Danish opinion is that long working hours suggest incompetence or a problem that the colleague might need help with. The working day for most Danes begins at 8am and ends at 4pm and they have pioneered the four-day week – not squeezing the fifth day into the other four but simply working eight hours four days per week with a lunch break. They work hard and are productive during their working hours but when work finishes, that is their time off and they spend the remaining time doing

whatever they enjoy – spending time with family and friends, playing sport, enjoying hobbies and relaxing. The societal impact and benefits of this are immeasurable.

A big focus of my discussion with Kay Xander Mellish focused on how unified Denmark is. There is an attitude of trust towards the government and what it does with public money to ensure wraparound care in education, health care, transport and infrastructure. Everyone is expected to contribute to the economy and society and so everyone gains, which is balanced and fair. High taxes are accepted for the benefits it brings the individual and their family but also the benefits for others. Kay believes that the government is better at showing what public money is being used for and demonstrating to people that they are benefiting from the social system that is in place. The outcomes of lifelong access to education without tuition fees, an effective, high quality health service, efficient public transport and excellent infrastructure in relation to roads, green spaces and public buildings and a high standard of public services are testament to that trust being well founded. Public services are heavily invested in no matter what the wealth of the municipality is. Library services are very important for study and community services as well as reading materials.

The impact of this expectation of social responsibility on Danish society and public knowledge that there are legislative safeguards in place, which can be democratically amended as the need arises to respond to societal change, reassures Danes that their way of life is protected. Social responsibility is reinforced in education and parenting. A flat hierarchy lies at the centre of the Danish approach hence people's opinions are asked for in the workplace and their input is valued for decision making and salaries are more equitable. The importance of work/life balance is adhered to, supported by employers, and protected by legislation. After work, weekends and holidays are respected and you would not be contacted by colleagues or your manager. The widely held view is that people should not need to work late and not only is it not expected, it is discouraged.

I spent an enjoyable few hours with Sam Floy in Roskilde talking about life and attitudes in Denmark. Sam said that family life is prioritised, and this is facilitated by excellent paternity and maternity leave, parental sick leave, 4pm finishes and shared holiday times between schools and workplaces. There is a low level of inequality due to the flat hierarchy approach to salaries and the access that everyone has to good public and health services. People are more trusting here towards each other and helping people is the norm, with the view that people would do the same for them. As well as reinforcing what Kay said regarding taxes and trusting the government, Sam also said that people are happy for taxes to be used to help others who earn less and for their money to be invested in infrastructure and public services for the benefit of everyone.

The outcome is that in Denmark it is not acceptable to damage property or use violence and people encourage one another to be law abiding and contribute to society in a positive way. People want to live up to a high standard of behaviour as that is the norm in the society that they live in. In sharp contrast to the UK, the impact for Danes is that vandalism and petty theft are rare, and crime levels are low. Because Danish citizens

believe they are treated well they treat others well and this has a domino effect on behaviours and attitudes.

Sam sees democracy in action in the *bofællesskab* where he lives and he believes this is reflected in Danish society. Decision making is based on discussion, negotiation and agreement by the majority. There is no resentment, manipulation or bluster, just debate and an acceptance of decisions that are in the best interests of everyone. Sam has witnessed the benefits of harmony and democracy in practice in Denmark through UK eyes. The more relaxed approach to structure in education in early years and the encouragement of resilience and independence from a very early stage has made Danes creative and emotionally intelligent, as well as academically successful. Play, relationships and creativity are very important in early years and informal learning also takes place on physical skills, fine motor skills, speech, comprehension and movement. The role of pedagogues and their links with parents as children move through the school system is crucial for feedback on the next stage of learning and for growth.

Regarding work/life balance, Sam was very much in agreement with Kay regarding Danish attitudes and that Danes have excellent work/life balance. He is currently working remotely for a UK company whilst living in Denmark and he said the contrast in attitudes with his wife's Danish employer is markedly different regarding working hours and paternity leave. There are better safeguards to protect work/life balance in Denmark and unions negotiate for leave, salary etc on behalf of individuals.

I visited nine public libraries during my research time in Denmark. Whilst they were all quite different in structure and style I was impressed by the warm and welcoming atmosphere and the clever use of light and space in all nine. I organised visits and meetings in Roskilde and Frederiksberg libraries to learn in more detail about their approaches to public engagement with library services and how they approach engaging and maintaining links with young people.

This interest stemmed from the statistics on levels of public library use in the UK and Denmark which showed higher levels of public engagement in Denmark ‘*On an annual basis, Denmark’s public libraries are frequented by around half of the Danish public (56%), making it Denmark’s most used cultural institution.*’¹⁴ Whereas in the UK Government survey 2019-2020 (pre covid stats) only 34% of UK citizens had used the library for any purpose.¹³ (A marked decline from 48% in 2005-2006.) In Denmark, 96.5% of citizens have previously been library users, are currently library users or expect to become library users in the future.¹⁴ Northern Ireland has the lowest level of public library engagement in the UK¹³ and yet my experience working in public libraries in Northern Ireland has demonstrated the considerable efforts that are made by Libraries NI to engage the different sections of society in a wide range of events and activities.

Schools in Denmark can book library visits for students grade 0–9 (6–16 years old) on the website and for library staff to visit schools. There are events in the annual calendar for year groups from kindergarten to grade 9 which schools are invited to attend. There

are regular exhibitions and workshops which can be general or bespoke to the class needs with different topics/themes each month. There is a strong focus on citizenship. Library staff organise author visits to local schools. Northern Ireland libraries have a good programme of engagement with nursery and primary schools but there is scope for more engagement at post primary level. Libraries in Denmark and Northern Ireland all engage in summer reading programmes with lots of engaging activities to inspire and promote a love of reading and to prevent a lapse in reading skills but there are differences. The Northern Ireland programme focuses on primary school, ending at age 11, whereas the Danish *Sommerbogfest* (summer book festival) goes up to age 15.

There is also a reading dog programme for children in grades 1–5 which can be booked online.²⁸ The child receives a diploma and a photograph of themselves with the reading dog in recognition of their efforts when they finish the six-week course. This is a voluntary service provided by *Fonden for Socialt Ansvar*²⁷ which local libraries facilitate. *‘A reading dog is a friendly and child-friendly dog that listens patiently and with interest to the books that the child reads. A reading dog has full focus on the child and neither corrects nor judges if the child makes a mistake. In this way, the reading dog helps to create a positive and different reading experience that results in increased reading pleasure and self-confidence.’*²⁸ Bylaws in Northern Ireland do not allow non-assistance dogs on library premises which means this reading dog programme is not possible, although there are similar successful programmes in the rest of the UK. Perhaps this is something which could be explored further.

The **attitudes** in both Roskilde and Frederiksberg libraries were similar. People are at the centre of everything, and the key focus is on public engagement that will make a difference. They want the pleasure of reading to be shared and to ensure that everyone has access to all that the library has to offer in terms of knowledge and culture. The importance of engaging with young people is emphasised. They want them to make use of the library, and they strive to make the library a welcoming space for them and their peers. They are aware how interest in reading can tail off in young adults and they work hard to try to prevent this by maintaining strong links with schools and universities and the young people directly. In the 2020 study, 63% of young people in Denmark aged 16–25 had used their library in the past year and half use the library at least once a month. They are the group in Danish society most likely to use library services.¹⁴ This contrasts strongly with the UK survey where 16–24 year olds are the least likely to have visited a library, only 21%. This shows significant decline when compared with the 2005–2006 statistics showing 51% of 16–24 year olds had visited a library that year.¹³

I met with Susan Jessen Spiele from Roskilde Central Library which encompasses the main library in the city centre and five local branches within the municipality of Roskilde. It is also one of the six regional libraries in Denmark. They have a bespoke Roskilde book bus which goes to fifteen different stops in the municipality. The main library offers a 24-hour returns service and the library is open to the public from 7am to 10pm every day and is staffed 10am to 7pm Monday to Friday, and 10am to 3pm on Saturday. There is a *Borger Service* (Citizens Advice Service) available on site. There is also a Creative House for Children on the campus.

The **outcomes** of being people centred with the emphasis on reading for enjoyment is seen in the daily and sometimes twice daily events held at Roskilde main library. The events are categorised for adults, young people and children. There are annual events, such as during Week 17 (when I visited) they celebrated the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals²³ with activities ranging from a Green Saturday Festival, a plant swap, a barter market, creating giant insects workshop for the whole family, look at the climate movement with grandparents and a clay day, to list a few. They also collaborate in local events, for example, they had celebrated *Lysfesten* (a local light festival) the week before.

Roskilde is famous for its annual music festival and the library brings a festival theme to their events as well. They host a very successful annual Roskilde Literature Festival with author talks, workshops and performances for adults and a large number of events for children and young adults. There is food and music and a festival atmosphere which welcomes all the family. They aim to appeal to all sections of society and focus on encouraging non/reluctant readers as well as book lovers to attend. This year the spotlight was on appealing to males aged 20–35. This is significant as *‘There is a clear connection between parents’ and children’s use of public libraries. 81% of children whose parents use public libraries have themselves used a public library within the past year meanwhile the same is only true of 32% of children whose parents do not use public libraries.’*¹⁴

As well as ordinary book groups for different ages and genres they also hold Silent Reading Groups with a minimum of two hours silent reading time. Library staff help book groups outside the library by providing the books needed for the book group event and some tips for discussion and questions on the book. Members can then pick them up and return them either to the group organiser or to the library. This makes book group affordable, convenient and establishes a link between the book group members and the library. This year the library also trialled a reading retreat which was very successful with 80 attendees. To focus on the retreat theme they hired plants, brought their comfy chairs and sofas into a quiet space with inexpensive goody bags for the 4-hour event. As well as the extensive preparation for all these events, I was extremely impressed by the level of post event analysis and evaluation carried out. This includes looking at footfall and reflections of library staff as well as detailed feedback from attendees to gauge reactions and get ideas for improvement going forward.

The children's library is bright, spacious and child friendly with a large play area and plenty of reading nooks. The books are placed at child level with symbols indicating different topics and genres so that it is accessible to all children, even those just learning to read. There are lots of seating areas, reading nooks and even a dressing up section complete with costumes (these seemed to be common in most libraries I visited). Across from the main library is the Creative House for Children which is an amazing space with reading beds, a piano, a giant dollhouse, dressing up room and a large creative space for arts and crafts. Local kindergartens and folkeskolen can book in for visits and interactive events. The young adult section in the main library is also very attractive with comfy seats, plants and a welcoming atmosphere. During my first visit a

local kindergarten group were in for story time and four local folkskole classes were in another space doing a series of activities. On my second visit some library staff were hosting the annual *sprogfitness* event in the park for three local folkeskoles. *Sprogfitness* is a Danish concept which involves physical activities and games to develop and promote language learning in a fun, interactive way.

The **impact** of this in Roskilde and beyond is considerable. The library is striving to forge a strong connection with young people through schools but also with individuals. They emphasise that the library is a free and welcoming space and young people are encouraged to come in with their friends and ‘hang out’. Because the staff are proactive and go to great lengths to nurture a love of reading in the whole community, they are aware of the wellbeing benefits of reading and ensure events are interactive and appealing. Roskilde library is truly ‘*a haven in our community*’.¹⁴

During my visit to Frederiksberg Library I met with Signe Amalie Svenningen, Head of Children’s Library, and my focus there was solely on children and young adults. Signe summarised their **attitude** with the words ‘*literature is at the heart of what we do*’. Until recently, library staff would have adapted their workshops and exhibitions outlined above around school specifications, but they became aware that they were beginning to lose out on promoting a love of books. Now they do both, covering school specifications but they also have workshops and exhibitions that focus on reading for pleasure and the joy of reading.

The **outcome** of this for young people in Frederiksberg is significant. There is a strong emphasis on reading for enjoyment rather than reading as a skill, for example, an annual summer reading project for grades 4,5 and 6. It takes the form of a summer party, and students come from four local schools four classes at a time, where they discuss thirty books and each student borrows one title to read over the summer. As the event is repeated each year, most students will come into the library three years in a row which encourages a feeling of connection before they go into grade 7 when, for some students, their enthusiasm for reading can start to decline. During my visit, they had an exhibition for children focusing on the Danish Constitution as a lead into Danish Constitution Day on the 5th of June. There was a giant book exploring the constitution that children could climb in and out of with interactive activities to provoke thought and discussion about democracy, rights and responsibilities in a child accessible way. This is just one example of how citizenship is being promoted across Denmark in libraries.

Due to a decline in school library facilities, Frederiksberg Library is piloting a mini library scheme in each grade 6 classroom in several local schools. Two students and a teacher come from each school to a day-long workshop at the end of grade 5 and select from 120 titles the books they would like in their class library in grade 6. This gives the students a say and promotes a sense of responsibility for the books. The government has provided a grant to pay for the books and the library and school coordinate the resources. This is a new initiative so it is not known if this will be extended beyond grade 5 to grade 6 but it is to help rebuild the libraries that have been lost in many folkskolen.

The **impact** is significant. There is a focus on fun and *hygge* in the library space for young people and library staff are actively encouraging teenagers to come to the library independently to meet their friends and catch up. There are comfy seats, a café style area with plants and plenty of light and space. They reach out to young people when they come in and talk about their reading preferences and encourage them to look around at what else is available. They want the library to be more than a study resource although they recognise the importance of that too. They follow TikTok so they can have the books that are trending available and respond to feedback from young people promptly so that they are offering what young people want to read. Every Wednesday there are themed reading and writing groups which young people can run for themselves in a separate space or have a member of the library staff to support them if they prefer. Parents are encouraged to relax during their visit with books available for them in the children's library and library staff will chat to them about what they are reading and share recommendations to make the visit an enjoyable experience for them too.

Chapter 4: Conclusion and recommendations

Attitudes – in every school I visited in Denmark, teaching empathy and social responsibility, promoting autonomy and empowerment and encouraging creativity were at the centre of the school. There is a positive attitude from students, teachers and parents towards components of the curriculum, such as *klassens tid*. All stakeholders believe in the importance of equipping young people to be able to contribute positively to society. The flat hierarchy system encourages young people to believe their views are both welcomed and valued. Young people wear their own clothes and are on first name terms with their teachers. Students from the age of 6 take responsibility for cleaning the tables, tidying their classroom, and watering the plants. Self-reliance and encouraging independence begin from two years old in *Vuggestue* (Nursery) and then in *Børnehave* (Kindergarten) and continues into *Folkskole* (Primary and Lower Secondary) and beyond.

Danes do not have a competitive attitude towards individual ‘winning’ – they place greater value on contributing to the team and being a good person. Due to Danish attitudes towards promoting curiosity and creativity, children are encouraged to play and have fun. In spaces for student relaxation (kindergarten, folkeskolen and gymnasium) there is play equipment. Children start school when they are six years old and there is either none or very little homework set until they are eleven. Their tests are not graded, and they do not sit any public examinations until 9th grade when they are sixteen. The teacher assessed grades for 9th grade have equal weighting to the public examination results for the next stage of education. Learning is about the journey not just the outcome. The attitude towards a healthy work/life balance for teachers and young people is that it is a priority and it must be promoted and protected.

Outcomes – in the classrooms I visited there was a focused and relaxed working atmosphere. Students have a sense of responsibility and a sense of ownership towards their school and their learning. They all contribute to ensuring their environment is clean and well kept. 100% of students surveyed in Frederiksberg Gymnasium said that it was important for young people aged 6–16 to have *klassens tid*. The level of enjoyment for *klassens tid* students in Saint Josef’s scored 4.3 out of 5 and 53% used the word ‘fun’ when describing these classes. Statistics mentioned previously demonstrate how the skills learned in *klassens tid* influence attitudes and behaviours. Teachers in all the schools I visited enjoy delivering the citizenship curriculum through discrete classes with their class group. All class teachers are involved in delivering the citizenship programme to their class group. Citizenship is embedded in the curriculum and promoted through all other subjects in the timetable. In addition, there are regular events in the school year where citizenship is explored and promoted. The young people in the schools I visited feel strong social connections, a sense of trust and are interested in learning due to curiosity rather than due to pressure to achieve.

Student councils are active; volunteering levels are high and working with and mentoring younger students is embedded in the school system. Student–teacher relations are positive and mutually respectful. Students understand that they will not always agree with one another, but they are equipped to navigate social tensions and accept difference of opinions. Students are not under pressure in the classroom and are able to enjoy learning and the acquisition of new skills. Original thought is encouraged as well as learning through getting things wrong.

Teachers can rely on their employers and teaching unions to ensure they have access to a healthy work/life balance with a manageable workload which is achievable within the working day. Mutual trust and respect between teachers and senior leaders were evident in all the schools I visited with goodwill on both sides. Teachers are treated as professionals who can complete their planning, preparation and marking at a time and place of their choice.

Impact – I learned that the focus on curiosity and creativity rather than grades means that learning is not regarded in a transactional way, instead there is a love of learning and a thirst for more knowledge which has not been stifled by being solely results focused. They are not looking for the ‘right’ answer and are interested in discovering new things. The philosophy of the International School of Billund, ‘*We teach children how to think. Not what to think*’²¹, is innate to the whole Danish Education system. Danes are lifelong learners and the thirst for knowledge instilled in school is facilitated by the non-fee-paying learning opportunities that are available and promoted throughout their lifetime. Danish schools perform well academically, they hold their own on a European and global level but they also outperform many of their European and global counterparts in levels of student wellbeing and willingness to contribute to school life.

Peer attitudes in school are focused on looking after the environment and there is little intentional damage or vandalism. The small number who do engage in malicious damage are quickly made aware by their peers that such behaviour is not acceptable and not how people behave in Denmark. This attitude influences the adults they become. What I saw was a love of their country and environment and a pride in being Danish. There is trust in the system and an ability to accept opinions that are different to their own with a respect for democratic decision making and outcomes, and an understanding that giving as well as gaining is a way of life. Teachers have time to prepare, assess, teach, reflect and improve and still have a healthy work/life balance and there is significantly less burnout and stress. Thus, they have a more harmonious and well-functioning society with a high percentage of volunteering and involvement in the democratic system, higher taxes which benefits them but also others and, repeatedly evidenced, higher levels of happiness on a global scale.³⁰

Recommendations

- The Minister of Education and the Department of Education need to take immediate and decisive action to show that they place high value on the delivery of an effective, robust citizenship programme to young people in Primary and Post Primary education in Northern Ireland. This is essential to ensure that the importance of social responsibility and trust becomes a priority which will filter down to head teachers, teacher training institutes and then to teachers, pedagogues, students, and parents. *‘It is not too late to resuscitate Citizenship education; however, an alignment of vision, action and accountability measure is required at all levels of leadership in the education system.’*⁹
- A taskforce of citizenship teaching experts/qualified practitioners is needed, who will deliver in-person and in-class support for teaching staff in schools as needed and these experts will also train representatives from each school who will then be on site to support teaching staff delivering the programme.
- Teaching staff delivering the citizenship programme must receive support via regular training and resources. Time needs to be made available for this – it is not sufficient to have online materials available without the time to access and complete the training. That simply becomes another pressure on teachers. All teachers should be involved in citizenship training as part of teacher training college but also annually and as needs arise and change.
- The citizenship programme must be delivered to students by teachers who know them, either as subject teachers or by a class tutor who has daily contact with the students.
- Students should have an input into the citizenship programme to ensure their views are represented and to foster a sense of ownership.
- Content outline and support materials should be available, and the programme should also have the capacity to respond to issues that arise within the class or school contact on a bespoke basis.
- The citizenship programme should have a discrete time allocation on the timetable and citizenship should also be embedded in the curriculum across all subjects. In addition, classes, year groups and schools should have regular citizenship events in the school calendar. It should be separate from the other current components of LLW.
- There should be less emphasis on grading and results up to age 15/16 to alleviate pressure on young people and to attempt to address the transactional attitude to learning which has become innate in Post Primary education. There needs to be a stronger emphasis on curiosity, creativity and enjoyment to encourage a lifelong love of learning. This will also alleviate pressure on teachers who, in the current system,

must focus on content and assessment-heavy curriculums. This will also free up the timetable to facilitate a more robust citizenship programme. *‘Currently the emphasis is on measuring exam performance, which overlooks factors such as the individual’s development, and progress over time, and the value added by the institution... we need to adopt broader measures of success which include achievement beyond qualifications that are viewed as academic.’⁷*

- There needs to be greater autonomy and practical support for schools to be able to develop a meaningful and bespoke citizenship programme which fits with their school vision and needs.
- There should be two separate bodies for curriculum and examination/assessment to ensure that both bodies have sufficient expertise. *‘The body with curriculum responsibilities (CCEA) has limited resources and very few curriculum specialists. Most of its staff are concerned with issues of assessment and qualifications... We recommend separate bodies for curriculum and assessment/qualifications.’⁷*
- Legislation and safeguards in place to promote and protect work/life balance.
- A return of communal singing in schools, more opportunities for mentoring and a volunteering/community programme should be encouraged.
- Post Primary links with public libraries should be embedded and transport for class visits to public libraries for primary and post primary schools should be financed by the Department of Education.

In Northern Ireland there needs to be a societal change in attitude to acknowledge the importance of all citizens and the contribution they can and should make to society. Better wage equity and recognition of the importance of all jobs and the vital role they play in our infrastructure on all levels and our economy should be promoted.

What next?

- Meet with the Minister of Education for Northern Ireland, Paul Givan, to discuss how we can bring about meaningful change to the citizenship provision in schools in Northern Ireland and to get feedback on my recommendations.
- Meet with the Committee for Education in Northern Ireland to share my findings, to gain further insights and to secure their support for a revised citizenship programme going forward.
- Meet with All-Party Group on Early Education and Childcare, All-Party Group on Further and Higher Education and the All-Party Group on Parental Participation in Education to share findings, get input and to see what role these groups could play in a new citizenship programme.
- Meet with the Youth Assembly Education Committee and The Secondary Students Union of Northern Ireland to gain insights into how young people want to move forward with a new citizenship programme and new approach to learning in schools.
- Meet with Initial Teacher Education (ITE) course providers in Northern Ireland to ask for the opportunity to give presentations to trainee teachers on my findings and to encourage additional citizenship training and provision in course content.
- Meet with the National Association of Headteachers to present my findings and gauge the level of support for changes to the citizenship provision in schools.
- Meet with Teaching Unions representatives in Northern Ireland to discuss my research and to share findings with particular focus on work/life balance and teacher training on delivering a citizenship programme.
- Meet with Roisin Radcliffe, Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment Programme Manager, Curriculum and Assessment to present my findings and gauge the level of support for an improvement of the current citizenship provision.
- Meet with Libraries NI to discuss the Danish library model and how links between post primary schools and public libraries in Northern Ireland could be strengthened.

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