

WAYS OF PROMOTING YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN EDUCATION IN DENMARK

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Sine Lehn from Denmark provides an analysis of young people's participation in Danish society. As with Portugal, Denmark has been experiencing a marked decline in the participation of young people in the electoral system. She describes the attempts by the Government to build active and democratic citizenship among young people through the promulgation of a National Youth Policy and other special initiatives such as 'education for participation' that is based in schools. Lehn also describes and analyses a three year special initiative for involving Danish municipalities in promoting young people's participation at a local and grassroots level. This chapter also provides insights into the unique approaches to using schools and the education process as a way of enhancing democratic citizenship.

Introduction

Today young people in Denmark are less active in nearly all areas of public decision making compared with their older counterparts. This has serious implications for the health of Danish representative democracy. It also affects the country's future on a whole range of public institutions. To address this situation, in 1997 the Danish Government passed the first official comprehensive youth policy which attempted to resolve the problem.

This paper will discuss the reasons for the decline in young people's participation and analyse the objectives of the National Youth Policy. Special attention will be paid to two examples of innovative practice. The first is 'Education for participation', a strategy for teaching children and young people to become active citizens with democratic values and a sense of common responsibility by building up the habit of participation in schools.

The second is a direct outcome of the new National Youth Policy. This nationwide

project covers 17 Danish municipalities, which have been appointed 'Youth Municipalities' for three-year terms. Each youth municipality has launched one or more projects, the aim of which is to increase the local level of youth participation. The paper also sums up the lessons learned from the experiences of this project.

Denmark and the decreasing number of young people

Statistics show that the number of young people in the Danish population has decreased greatly during the last decades. In 1987 the number of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 peaked at 800,000. In 2004 this number will decrease by 25% to 600,000, the lowest since 1920 (Bay, 1996). On the other hand, the life expectancy for elderly people has increased since the end of World War II, and in the same period the birth rate has decreased. This has resulted in a decline of the percentage of young people in the population.

As a result Denmark faces a peculiar problem. The number of people who are available for employment is decreasing while the numbers of elderly people requiring social services is increasing. The decreasing number of young people also affects a number of institutions and businesses that depend on young people.

Democracy and the downward trend of participation

Denmark's democracy is a representative democracy. Thus active participation in both national and local elections is central. This is the key avenue for citizen engagement in public life. Participation in elections is also important for the legitimisation of important political decisions.

Compared with most other countries, Denmark has traditionally seen a relatively high election turnout. In 1968 the poll was 89.3%, while in the 1970s it was 87.7%. During the 1980s the poll dropped to 86%, and this tendency continued through the 1990s where the poll was 84.4%. When focusing on young people's participation in national and local elections this tendency becomes even more striking (Andersen, 2000). This is illustrated in Table 1 below.

The table shows that young people are less likely to vote than older citizens. When trying to explain this tendency, one might point to historical and social circumstances. Older generations established parliamentary conventions and traditions a long time ago. People born before 1945 formed their identity in a historic period

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Table 1. Poll in the Local Election 1997 and the National Election 1998.¹

Year of birth	Local election 1997			National election 1998		
	Average %	Men %	Women %	Average %	Men %	Women %
1975–80	69	71	67	87.5	92	83
1960–74	85	85	85	95.5	95	96
1945–59	92	92	92	94.5	95	94
1930–44	93.5	93	94	97	96	98
Before 1930	94.5	98	91	97	97	97

marked by events, which reminded them that democracy was something that had to be fought for. Therefore voting, as well as other forms of democratic participation, became an important way of demonstrating support for the national democracy.

The generation born after 1945 developed a different attitude towards the parliamentary conventions. The wars in Europe were history, and democracy no longer seemed at risk. Direct political participation is not considered as important by this generation as the older one. There is a sense that this generation takes its democratic rights for granted.

According to recent Danish research, a thesis that seems to hold well is that today's young people consider democracy to be a basic framework of society. This means that democracy within the young generations is seen as something which is

Table 2. Attitudes Towards Democracy And Participation (1998).²

Birth Year	Voting (%)	Lawful behaviour (%)	Tolerance (%)	Responsible towards others (%)	Keeping updated on society issues (%)	Active in public discourse (%)
1975–80	86	88	84	78	76	49
1960–74	92	89	86	84	81	48
1945–59	95	93	87	87	86	55
1930–44	84	93	84	87	86	55
Before 1930	98	93	84	87	87	57

¹ Andersen, Johannes: 'Unge valgdeltagelse'. From: Andersen, Johannes: 'Unge valgdeltagelse' ('Young People's Participation in Elections') In *Når unge udfordrer demokratiet – dokumentation og debat. (When the Young Challenge the Democracy – Documentation and Debate)*. Centre for Youth Research, 2000.

² Andersen, Johannes: 'Unge valgdeltagelse' ('Young People's Participation in Elections') In *Når unge udfordrer demokratiet – dokumentation og debat. (When the Young Challenge the Democracy – Documentation and Debate)*. Centre for Youth Research, 2000.

simply there, a reality independent of the individual. The following table reveals the attitudes of young people towards central democratic norms.

The higher the percentage, the more important the norm is rated. As one can see, the number drops quite dramatically when the youngest generation are asked about the importance of voting at public elections. The feeling of responsibility to solve common societal problems is also of less importance to the young. This points to another interesting factor regarding young people – that generally young people of today are likely to be preoccupied with projects and beliefs concerning themselves as individuals, rather than societal issues and concerns of common good.

Sociological research into the field of young people shows that it is not adequate to see this only as a question of participation or non-participation alone. Young people participate less because different kinds of political participatory activities do not seem important, relevant or reasonable. However, this does not indicate that young people are less active or that they are less visionary concerning what they want or what the ideal society should look like. These issues are merely looked at from the individual's point of view. One of the consequences of this is the democratic convention of deciding issues on the basis of majority votes. Today, young people do not consider this principle to be a reasonable democratic form of decision making. Increasingly, the principle is seen as interfering with the individual's freedom. Therefore young people do not feel obligated to execute a decision arrived at using this principle (Simonsen, 2000).

Research also shows that young people see democracy and democratic actions as closely connected to the personal and thus private. Democracy has become a personal issue. There are no given rules and you have to decide what you want. Everyone has to decide for himself or herself what is right. When working with youth participation you can either mourn this, or you can work with it.

The Danish youth policy

In 1997 the Danish Government presented its first proposal for a national youth policy,³ which includes all young people aged 15 to 25. The Government decided that Denmark should have a coherent youth policy, placed with the Ministry of Education. Until this point, the Danish youth policy had been divided between different departments such as those of education, social affairs, labour etc.

³ Further information on the National Danish Youth Policy can be found on: <http://www.uvm.dk>

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The strategy of the Danish Government youth policy is about thinking across different political sectors in order to create coherence, integration and achieve the best results.

The aim of the Danish youth policy has, from the beginning, been to reflect the demands and wishes of young people. This means that all political issues that affect young people's lives should be at the centre of the agenda of Danish youth policy. Youth policy is only meaningful if it involves young people and gives them responsibility and a voice.

The proposal for a youth policy was formulated largely on the basis of contributions from young people themselves. To accomplish this, the Government set up youth conferences and hearings, where different youth organisations were invited to participate. The overall objective of the Danish youth policy is that, '...all young people shall be able to enjoy an eventful youth, qualifying them for an independent and diversified life [experience] as active contributors to the development of the society.'

The above framework has ten specific objectives.

1. Influence and responsibility

'The youth policy shall form an improved basis for young people's active participation in the development of democracy and their direct influence on and responsibility for matters affecting themselves.'

2. Education for all young people

'All young people shall have formal and real possibilities of completing a youth education. The target is that by year 2000, 90 to 95% of a young generation should complete a youth education.'

3. Full employment for young people

'The target is full employment for young people by year 2000 (a youth unemployment rate of max. 5%).'

4. International qualifications

'All young people shall be adequately qualified to meet the requirements and utilise the possibilities of the international community.'

5. Access to information technology for the young

'Young people shall have the possibility to acquire basic qualifications in

information and communication technologies, to enable them to seek new knowledge independently by means of IT.'

6. Improved guidance and counselling

'All young people shall have access to comprehensive, coherent and straightforward guidance and counselling.'

7. Establish a base in life

'All young people, including those with special difficulties, shall have real possibilities of establishing their lives.'

8. Well-functioning housing areas

'One of the aims of the youth policy is for the young people to live in well-functioning housing areas, with all-round possibilities of development and experience.'

9. Cultural variety

'The youth policy shall contribute to giving the young people a basic knowledge of their own cultural background, thereby promoting mutual understanding between different ethnic groups.'

10. Knowledge about young people

'Updating and development of the youth policy shall be a dynamic process so that it relates to the challenges and possibilities that the young people are facing. The youth policy shall, therefore, ensure that new knowledge about the living conditions and viewpoints of the young people is gathered on a continuous basis.'

This policy has, during the last three years, resulted in a number of initiatives, one of which is the appointment of 17 'Youth Municipalities'. This project will be discussed fully in a later section of this paper.

Education for participation

In Denmark young people get to vote at the age of 18, but the education for democratic citizenship and participation begins long before this. It is widely

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known and accepted that the educational system plays a very important role in relation to democracy. For democracy to be viable, it must be part of people's everyday lives.

Therefore, by actively including democracy and participation in the educational system it is acknowledged that it takes more than constitutional rights to make sure that this happens. The educational system with all its different institutions must take an active part in ensuring that young people develop an awareness of how democracy works. It is also clear that children and young people learn to feel responsible towards democratic participation by being part of democratic activities.

It is stipulated in the first object clause of primary and lower secondary education, 'The Folkeskole'⁴, that the educational activities must contribute to the education of children and young people to be democratic citizens. In 1970 it was made a statutory right for pupils to participate in matters concerning the school, and pupils' representatives were also permitted to participate in school management meetings. In 1986 student councils were made mandatory, and in 1990 when school boards⁵ were introduced, students immediately obtained the right to representation. Seven years later, in 1997, they also obtained the right to vote. Democracy in the Danish educational system can be categorised in three ways:

1. Teaching democracy.

In the curriculum of both primary and lower secondary schools there are a number of subjects which contain details on how democracy works and deals with the rights and obligations of the citizens.

2. Democracy in the classroom.

From an international point of view 'The Folkeskole' holds a very high percentage of the children in every class together across differences in social and ethnic backgrounds. Equality and broadness are perceptible characteristics

⁴ The Danish Folkeskole is a comprehensive school covering both primary and lower secondary education, i.e. the first (grade 1 to 6) and second (grade 7 to 9/10) stage basic education. In other words it caters for the 7 to 16/17-year-old. It comprises the Folkeskole, private elementary schools and continuation school.

⁵ The school boards lay down principles for the organising of the teaching. They determine the number of periods in each grade, optional subjects, special education and the disposition of the pupils in different classes. They also organise the cooperation between home and school, and it is their job to divide the teaching among the teachers. They must also approve the school budget and decide if adults are allowed to attend classes. They work out suggestions for curriculum, and recommend development projects to the local authorities. They also make statements on teachers and other staff to be hired.

of the Danish 'Folkeskole'. The legislation stipulates that teachers and students in each class are to cooperate on what objectives are to be achieved. They are also to discuss working methods and the selection of educational materials. Right from the beginning the students are co-responsible for their education.

3. Influence on the daily lives at the educational institutions – the representative democracy.

Concern with pupil and student influence in Denmark is a pioneer case. Both when it comes to the everyday realities in educational institutions and overriding considerations in education policy.

The three aspects must be viewed as a package. If lessons in democracy are to be meaningful, students must experience influence and responsibility in relation to their own education, both when it comes to the everyday reality in class, the institution and the educational system as a whole.

Student councils

The use of student councils in schools is mandatory in Danish schools. All schools that teach from fifth grade and up must have a student council formed by the students. The basis of the council is the students, which means that it is the students themselves that decide how to put together the council. They also set their own agenda. There are no specific issues which a student council has to deal with, but studies have shown that the areas of interest are those closest to the young people's everyday life in the institution.

Most schools have elections at the beginning of each school year. Experience has shown that it sometimes is quite difficult to make student councils work as intended and thereby give the student a feeling of participation in decision making and also that there's a tendency for a large number of students to not take an interest in the council participation.

Studies have also shown that there is a way of dealing with the problem of lack of participation in student councils. It has proven effective to have the council meetings on a regular basis.

Also, a number of schools have had luck with splitting the school council into two, one for the youngest students and one for the older ones. This gives everyone a

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clearer sense of responsibility and chance to be heard. Another way of supporting the interest and participation in student councils is to have a contact teacher. The contact teacher sits in on the student council meetings and provides an opportunity for the student to ask questions and shed light on issues that are unclear to them. For this arrangement to work the contact teacher must be neutral and objective and only act when called upon. Lastly, it has proven helpful to provide training to members of the student councils. Through this they learn about the aims and objectives of the councils. They also learn about conference leadership, negotiation skills, public speaking and so on.

Youth municipalities

In 1997, the Danish Governments issued an invitation to 275 municipalities wishing to participate in a three-year pilot project aimed at advancing the objectives of the youth policy. Some 52 of the 275 municipalities responded. Of the 52 applicants 17 were chosen. They were given extra financial resources for developing new methods of youth participation. These municipalities were designated as 'Youth Municipalities.' The pilot project was implemented over a three-year period between 1997 and 2000. The aims of the project were that the selected municipalities test and develop new ways to implement the Government's ten objectives of the youth policy. A municipal framework was chosen to make sure that a close contact with the everyday life of young people was established. Prior to the project, several youth groups were asked about their views, and their views were considered.

The criteria for the selection of the youth municipalities focused on the following aspects:

- The young people would have to be actively involved in the planning, realisation and evaluation of the activities and initiatives.
- Specific efforts would have to be made to involve as many young people as possible, including those who would not normally get involved in decision making.
- The municipalities would have to launch initiatives that would offer realistic prospects of achieving a number of the ten objectives of the official youth policy, within the test period.

The 17 local projects are all very different from each other, and they engage in a

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broad range of municipal activities on behalf of the youth groups. The projects of the 17 youth municipalities included⁶:

- setting up youth councils⁷
- youth conferences;
- setting up cooperation with a twin city;
- forming a youth panel, which cooperates with a local newspaper;
- setting up a youth centre run by the youth themselves, setting up a youth secretariat, where the young deal with social, cultural and political issues;
- organising shared accommodation for disadvantaged young people;
- initiating direct youth radio broadcasts;
- running a project for young people with eating disorders;
- developing an IT and cinema training programme for local youth groups;
- employing a democracy consultant to the local youth council;
- publishing a youth magazine aimed at local youngsters and politicians;
- setting up an IT training programme for low performers;
- appointing an ombudsman for children and young people;
- creating a monthly local TV programme, called 'Voice of the Youth';
- setting up peer counselling;
- appointing a team of reporters to pick up the wishes of the local young people; and
- supporting disadvantaged youth groups.

Table 3. Objectives of the activities launched by the youth municipalities

<i>Objective</i>	<i>Number of municipalities</i>
Influence and responsibility	17
Access to IT for the young	15
Guidance and counselling for the young	14
Establish a base in life	10
Knowledge about young people	10
Cultural variety	9
Education for all young people	8
Well-functioning housing areas	5

⁶ A complete listing of the different activities and in which municipality the activities take place can be found on the website: <http://uvm.dk/ungdom>. The division of the total amount of 45 million DKK for the project is also to be found here.

⁷ The term 'youth council' covers many different kinds of actions. It includes formally elected youth councils as well as different groups of young people gathering at one or more occasions. The same applies for the terms 'youth secretariat' and 'youth centre'. The activities covered by the terms are defined in the local context and are therefore not to be understood unambiguously.

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Table 3 above shows the objectives of the projects.

As the figure shows, all municipalities have chosen the first objective ‘influence and responsibility’ as an aim for their project. Second and third most popular objectives are ‘access to information technology for the young’ and ‘improved guidance and counselling’.

The above also points to the fact that the youth municipalities as a whole cover all of the areas of national youth policy. This means that the experiences from this project give a solid foundation for revision and renewal of youth political efforts. They can also prove useful for policy makers and organisations working to improve youth policy and the basis for youth participation outside Denmark.

The projects have resulted in a number of lessons that can be of use to others working within the field of youth development. Foremost is that they have shown that it is possible to turn a (national) youth policy into local and concrete actions.

What is to be learned about young people’s participation from the youth municipalities? The fundamental lesson is that young people are just as diverse as the rest of the population. Research conducted by the Danish Youth Council shows that young people have very different motives for wanting to participate. However, it is possible to say something about what generally motivates the young. The project has shown that young people have certain requirements in order to become and stay involved. These are:

- personal challenge and satisfaction;
- possibility for a dialogue concerning their visions and wishes;
- transparent, realistic and reliable guidelines in relation to economy, time and politics;
- acceptance of new working methods, meeting and organisation forms;
- to be part of the entire process;
- to have direct influence on both form and content; and
- to be able to turn ideas into reality within a short period of time.

Accordingly, the most efficient method in relation to promoting youth participation is to make sure that the content of the projects initiated is flexible and dynamic. Hardly any young people are keen on participating in projects that cannot be changed to accommodate their interests. In order for young people to get involved they require influence on content and working methods (Bach 2000a, 2000b).

Organisation – lessons to be learned

Research into the implementation of the different activities initiated by the 17 municipalities can be broadly divided into two categories. The first captures activities related to independent project-based organisations, and the second on operation-based/municipality-based organisations. None of the municipalities involved in the project used solely one method (Bach 2000a, 2000b). Useful lessons can be learned when looking at project-based organisations and operation-based organisations as two extremes on a continuum.

The activities based on project organisation are characterised by:

- a specific, new activity;
- project groups and *ad hoc* committees;
- establishing and developing resources and activities;
- new and unknown paths;
- time constraints; and
- project leader and project hired staff.

And the operation-based organisations are characterised by:

- maintenance and cementing;
- administrative organisation;
- controlling of predetermined resources and activities;
- familiar paths;
- continuous actions; and
- administrative staffing.

The lessons to be learned from these two counterparts can be summed up in the following manner. First of all activities on project-based organisations depend on interest. This may seem somewhat obvious, except that there were projects in the youth municipalities that were never carried out despite political will and financial resources. What killed them was a lack of interest.

The activities based on project organising tend to involve new activities. It appeals directly to young people involving themselves, as they are keen on engaging themselves in single events or isolated issues. Therefore the project organisation creates immediate results and dynamics. A challenge posed by this model is the fact that for young people to engage in this process they need to have confidence and faith in the project leaders. And some of these projects are also weakly founded politically, administratively and financially due to the fact that they are not part of a

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whole. These types of projects are unstable by nature; they have limited financial resources and tend to be easily shut down.

It also seems that young people sometimes have difficulty handling and accepting the necessity of, and responsibility for, organisational processes beginning with formulating the aim of the project and ending with an evaluation. Lastly, the project-based method has also shown that it is of great importance that young people have access to the necessary resources and information. (Bach 2000a, 2000b).

The activities based on the operation of an organisation have a somewhat more narrow appeal to young people, so more effort has to be applied to keep young people interested. The strength of the operation-based organisation is without question the political and administrative obligation to a continuous revision of the youth political activities. In addition, the young have a secure place on the municipal budget. Therefore the operation-based organisation provides a more solid base, and guarantees that the project may continue after the completion of the youth municipality project.

The weaknesses of this kind of organisation include the fact that adult control and bureaucracy characterise the projects, and this seems to prevent a great number of young people from getting involved. Also the operation-based youth activities have a tendency to be forgotten and invisible, because it is only given attention when it is formally revised.

It can be said that each type of organisation generates a different kind of community, one based on civic action and another based on political action. Critically, the project-based community focuses on starting and completing concrete activities *with* and *by* young people. The politically oriented community relies and focuses political influence concerning matters of importance *for* the young. Subsequently, they each attract and exclude different kinds of young people. Therefore, an important lesson to be learned from this is that the way in which projects are organised, to a certain degree, determines the kind of young people that get involved. It is very difficult if not impossible to create a project that attracts all types of young people. By using both methods of organisation you make room for various kinds of young people: those who are attracted to the idea of a single project/independent bases and those who want to work through and in a political environment. In any case it is important to be aware that different kinds of young people are attracted to different kinds of participatory activities. This is a factor which practitioners in youth issues should be mindful of. One may also want to discuss the viability of an objective that aims at all young people. It might be a

better idea to aim more specifically and then work out a project design with this in mind.⁸

Conclusion

The youth municipality projects have shown that young people do in fact wish to participate in local decision making, when and if it concerns issues that relate to their specific life circumstances. These local projects have also taught us that young people do wish to participate in local decision making *if* they can take part in setting the agenda and deciding the execution methods. The project has also highlighted the importance of paying attention to the design of these projects. It is not only the project which matters, but also the way it is organised that plays an important role in terms of who it attracts.

Lastly, it is important that most of these projects survive beyond the three years, which is the official time frame. At the termination of the project (at the end of 2000), quite a number of the 17 municipalities had initiated a process of revising or formulating youth political action programmes. A number of the municipalities have also taken this as an opportunity to formulate a coherent youth policy.

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⁸ All information about results and outcomes of the youth municipality project, I have from articles written by Thomas Bach from the Danish Youth Council. Unfortunately, none of them are translated into English. Of course neither Thomas Bach nor the Danish Youth Council are to blame for any inexactitudes due to the translation process. For further information on the youth municipality project or on the Danish Youth Council please go to www.duf.dk

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