

# THE DANISH WAY

*“Klassens tid”  
Aspects of Building  
Democracy in Danish Schools*



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Sandahl Aps  
Lyngby Hovedgade 96, stuen  
2800 Kgs. Lyngby  
Denmark  
[www.ibensandahl.com](http://www.ibensandahl.com)

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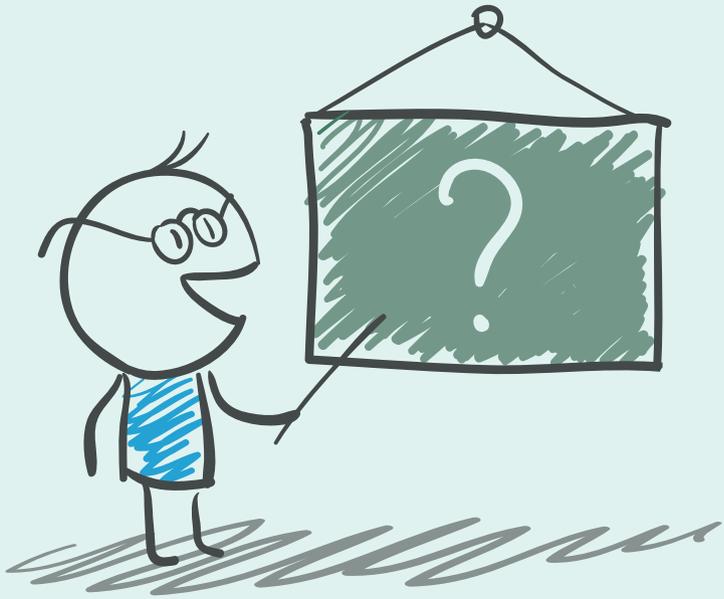
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## FOREWORD

By the release of *The Danish Way of Parenting* I was unprepared for the extraordinary journey the book would take. From a grassroots movement to a growing global garden, I feel very humble every day with each new reader.

I have been fascinated and bewildered by the locations of where all the readers came from: South Africa, Germany, Korea, Poland, China and the United States, just to name a few. The feedback from parents, college professors, ambassadors, teachers, nonparents and other caregivers have been amazing.

People have expressed gratitude and a wish to learn more, to understand and make *The Danish Way* phenomena, something they could adopt into their own system, whatever it is in their family system or in an institutional or educational system.

Some have wanted to know more of what the ‘class time’ stands for, but to understand this phenomenon you need to know more on what values the Danish *Folkeskole* (Folkschool) is built on.

We all want the same – make children’s lives a better life. But people also want more information on “how to do” in life, some concrete ideas and guidance to find a way to implement meaningful ideas, with respect for each child’s potential in their own lives.

With my years of experience as a teacher, it is natural for me to meet this demand. I was a teacher for 10 years and a class teacher for the same wonderful class for 8 years. What I learned from my students by following their development from small and curious individuals to strong and mature young fellows, was a priceless experience that I will always cherish. The idea of writing of what “*Klassens tid*” signifies came from all of you, so I will put the ideas into a bigger perspective of values in our schools.

Thank you.

Iben Dissing Sandahl

## WHAT IS "KLASSENS TID"?

"Klassens tid" or class time aims to promote students' engagement in their own mental development by increasing their knowledge about each other and themselves, and thus work for a better mutual understanding and acceptance of everyone – an aspect is to have empathy.

In that way, they get a better insight into different perspectives - and experiences of wellbeing both at school and in the world in general.

An important part of life is the ability to socialize. These skills can be developed and practiced.

Empathy is not something transmitted by the written word alone or something you are born with or without. Empathy is kindness, sympathy and compassion, and understanding of the other/others. It is a quality and intensity in human contact.

Social learning is part of actual teaching situations, where adults themselves have worked long and intensely on their own contact with others, and thereby through their behavior they actualize what is being taught.

"The Class time" has multiple purposes. In Denmark, a class-teacher is the key person in every student's school life. She/he is the one creating and coordinating learning processes, both academically and socially, and therefore it is naturally the class-teacher's job to support the students closely and emotionally, too.

If a child does not function optimally socially and emotionally, it isn't possible to get much out of the teaching and that's why the class time is valued highly in Denmark. For the teacher it provides reflections on own efforts to create an inclusive learning environment where students want to learn and participate. It is a way of making

the class reflect on how to team build and create a well-functioning community.

Most often it is spent on “urgent” cases, which the students bring up, however the purpose is for all the students to come together in a comfortable setting to talk about any problems they may be having. Perhaps someone feels left out or is in a conflict he or she can’t solve alone. Together, the class tries to respect all aspects and angles and together they give good ideas to find a solution. It must be in an atmosphere where the individual student’s vulnerability is not exposed.

Sometimes parents might bring up issues and even come to the class and present it.

As mentioned before a class-teacher has a key role in the Danish school. It is a phenomenon in our educational system that is highly valued.

## THE CLASS TEACHER’S ROLE

In Denmark, a class-teacher is the key person in every pupil’s school life, creating and coordinating learning opportunities, both academically and socially, and therefore it is naturally the class-teacher’s job to support the students closely and emotionally too. If a child isn’t functioning socially, it isn’t possible to get the most out of teaching and that’s why *klassens tid*” (Class time) is valued highly in Denmark.

This specific and extended teacher responsibility draws long lines back in history. Usually it was the teacher of Danish that would take a class from first class and sometimes all the way up to 9th -tenth

grade. In 1993 in the “Law on Education” the “Class Time” was introduced and became a core part of the curriculum, thereby stressing the importance of all the aspects of a class teacher’s role.

It was implemented into every class-teacher’s scheduled time, one lesson each week in all classes.

**Class teacher’s tasks** as a facilitator of the class wishes and interests Student contributory influence tends to slip into the background when teachers plan together teaching. Basically, all teachers have a responsibility to involve the students in the planning of teaching, but it will be natural for the class teacher to assume a coordinating role, to create threads.

The following are suggestions on how this can be done.

**Class conversation** is a good platform because it often occurs naturally in teaching. It becomes significant when it manages to maintain questions, suggestions and requests from students.

**Class meeting** is a special structured interview form, with pre-agreed rules, such as agenda, moderator and a time horizon. Class meeting often includes topics and issues from the social interactions in the classroom. These may be questions about partnerships, and on what principles problems should be solved. It can also be a specific conflict resolution. Class teacher’s task in such situations is to guide students to see a connection between decisions and values: the common value of the interaction of learning/behaving and participation.

It is for teachers or educators to improve their connection between their students and themselves as role models, but also and more

important to give the students the best possibilities to grow and become healthy and well-functioning individuals in a social context.

It has multiple purposes. As a teacher, it helps to reflect on your own efforts to create an inclusive learning environment where students want to learn and participate.

It also aims to promote student engagement in their own mental development by increasing their knowledge about each other and themselves, and thus work for a better mutual understanding and acceptance of all. That way they get an insight into different perspectives and experiences.

The purpose is for all the students to come together in a comfortable setting to talk about any problems they may be having. Perhaps someone feels left out or has a disagreement they can't solve themselves. Together, the class tries to respect all aspects and angles and together they find a solution.

Although the "class time" most often is spent on "urgent" cases, which the students bring up - it is always the teacher that is in control and facilitates this necessary contact between everyone in the class.

The most important thing is that everyone is heard, seen and acknowledged as a part of a bigger community. When you are recognized, you become someone.

Empathy plays a key role in improving our social connections, which is a major factor in our overall happiness.

Teaching empathy has not only been proven to make kids more emotionally and socially competent and greatly reduce bullying, it can also help them be more successful and high-functioning adults in the future.

## ISSUES THAT CAN BE BROUGHT UP

Class Discussions based on the student council issues:

- \* mobile phone problems
- \* prevention of vandalism at the school
- \* football tournaments between classes, etc.
- \* Evaluation with the class about parents' involvement and social events such as: trips, events, parent cooperation etc.
- \* Planning and evaluation (the coordinating part) with the class teacher about the collaboration, interdisciplinary courses and compulsory subjects.
- \* How to commute safely
- \* Talks about how to have a healthy life (health, sexuality, family and friends' relations).
- \* Information about the education, vocational and labor market and talks about your own decisions.

Ways to act:

- \* Responsibility goes both ways
- \* Take responsibility
- \* Nothing changes by itself, so although you may think that it's everybody else's fault YOU need to do something to change it
- \* Talk about it
- \* Everyone needs to bring up issues
- \* Write it down!

Make a class manifest where it is written down what you have talked about, setting some rules for the class. It may be that you must remember to say hello to everyone; that one must not slander or turn eyes. Print it out and hang it up in class.

- \* Decorate

It's always nicer to be somewhere you feel comfortable. Put up posters on the wall, make a cozy corner and agree on what kind of music you want to be played during breaks.

\* Fun Ideas

It's a good idea to do something together, which are not about school. Arrange a movie night, throw a party or arrange to eat breakfast together on Saturdays. But remember not to exclude anybody!

Openings for talks about difficult issues:

Children as adults will feel lonesome and especially when having problems/sorrow within their families, but also the difficult thing about individual changes in life or the difficulties of becoming part of groups, so hereby openings based on feeling-words:

\* Fear

Tell about a time when you were afraid.

What else can make you afraid?

Who/what can help you when you are afraid?

Are you afraid of someone/something at school?

How can you see that a person is afraid?

\* Privations

Have you tried to miss someone very much? - Tell about it.

Is there anything or anyone that can help you when you miss or feel left out?

\* Joy

Tell about a time when you were happy.

Try to describe how it felt in your head and your body when you were happy.

Are there other/others who can make you happy?

Can your peers at school make you happy - how?

Do you cry when you care?

How can you see that a person is happy?

\* Bullying/teasing

Have you teased anyone?

Are you being teased by someone?

What is it like to be teased?

What did you think when you were bullied?

Why do you think that someone teases others?

How can you help someone being teased?

How can we be friends again with someone you've teased or you have been teased by?

Have you tried to tease one for fun - and the other did not think it was funny?

How was it? Did you become good friends again?

\* Grief

Can you see if a person is upset? How?

What do you do if you in school discover, that one of your mates are sad?

If you are sad, what would you expect from your peers/teachers?

Tell about a time when you were upset, and someone helped or comforted you.

## GOOD IDEAS FOR TEAMBUILDING, ESPECIALLY FOR YOUNGER CHILDREN

### \* Butt-race

The students are divided into 4 teams (just count 1-2-3-4-1-2...) or how many are convenient.

The four teams stand in a row.

At the other end put a chair opposite each group and put a pile of banknotes, which are in different colors for each group on the chairs.

The first of each team runs to the group's chair and take a note. On each card, it says a word to guess for the rest of the group.

The word e.g. CAT must be spelled with the whole body, using arms and legs, bending, moving your stomach. The group guesses the letters one by one, or they might be guessing the whole word. Each member in the group takes turn in proposing a letter until the right one is found.

The group that first solves all the words on the banknotes has won. One can also compete on time.

### \* "Say something nice"

The teacher writes down all the adjectives the class can think of that describes a person in a nice way, e.g. kind, considerate, helpful...

Each student must write down 5 words on labels.

The task is now to circle around and place it on classmates' backs, but each person must only have 5 labels.

When all students have labels on their backs the teacher makes partnerships and the 2 students take turns in taking a label, but they must give an explanation like e.g. the word helpful: the other day you helped Laura to find her jacket.

The teacher finishes the session when appropriate, and the students can put their labels in their pencil case, logbook etc. The class

teacher can finally ask if the students liked it and if so give them an idea of doing it also in daily life.

\* A tree of hearts

Make a tree or get a plant and then have a box with red hearts to hang on the tree.

During a certain time, students take hearts from the basket and write a name of any student that they think have done something nice or positive. It motivates more kindness and care, as children like to be highlighted.

\* The temperature barometer of the class

When the class has a talk about how things are going, the class teacher makes a barometer. It symbolizes the temperature of the class well-being.

Each student draws a line from bottom to top – depending on the “temperature” of how the individual student perceives the social atmosphere in the class.

It provides an opportunity for the teacher to ask more closely into the temperature, if students have rated themselves low.

It is a good opportunity to talk about what’s going on in class and to get a sense of where to intervene. Some students do not want to elaborate on the “why”, but it still provides a picture of whether there is dissatisfaction that must be handled. This exercise is great at all grades.

\* Cooperative learning

Cooperative learning is a way of structuring teaching/learning/communication skills/character-building within school life, thought out and invented by Spencer Kagan. You can find all his ideas and structures on the internet.

The last 10 years his ideas have brought many of the ideas of class time and even the whole way of teaching into the Danish classrooms.

## THOUGHTS AND REFLECTIONS

What I have experienced during the years I was a class teacher and from my work with children as a psychotherapist is that a lot of children and young adults feel lonely today. They might not express it directly in words that way, but they find it difficult to find someone who they can share deeper thoughts with.

They see their friends from the outside, but feel from the inside, when it comes to themselves.

The fact that time has changed and everyday life is more and more built on a hectic social media network creates a different type of young human beings today and a different way to handle conflicts and failure to thrive.

I don't believe that it is possible to change the norms and discourses that flow in the wind, we can't just take away tablets, cellphones and computer games - they are here to stay.

What we can do is to understand the world, in which our children and students grow up. It is difficult sometimes, because it requires an understanding of oneself, a lot of empathy and surely some insights in children's inner and outer world.

Otherwise we will constantly project our understanding or our own perceptions of the children who are part of our lives and who do not know better than to strive to satisfy our needs.

By giving space in the schools and at home to “hygge”, play and have meaningful conversations, we give children a platform where they do not have to perform.

Since children spend so much time in school, it is necessary that we help them get in touch with something deeper within themselves and that we do not only focus on academic values – that we allow them to express and tell something from their world from outside the school – that way we help them connect school life with private life and that way we help them find a balance, where it is okay to act in accordance to what they believe and what they feel.

In Denmark, we have got a new Folkeskolelov (folkschool law) in 2014 and the special lesson ‘class time’ is not anymore a scheduled lesson in the timetable, but all the values are part of the school life for a Danish student.

Since we can’t change the circumstances within which our students or children grow up we must take an active part in creating the best possibilities for them to feel seen, heard and acknowledged in school.

A colleague of mine just told me this beautiful story. She had been to a 10 years’ reunion and one of the boys who had had some problems said to her, “you really saved my life. You saw what I needed and found another way for me than the academic way – now I am such a happy person and I have actually started my own business”.

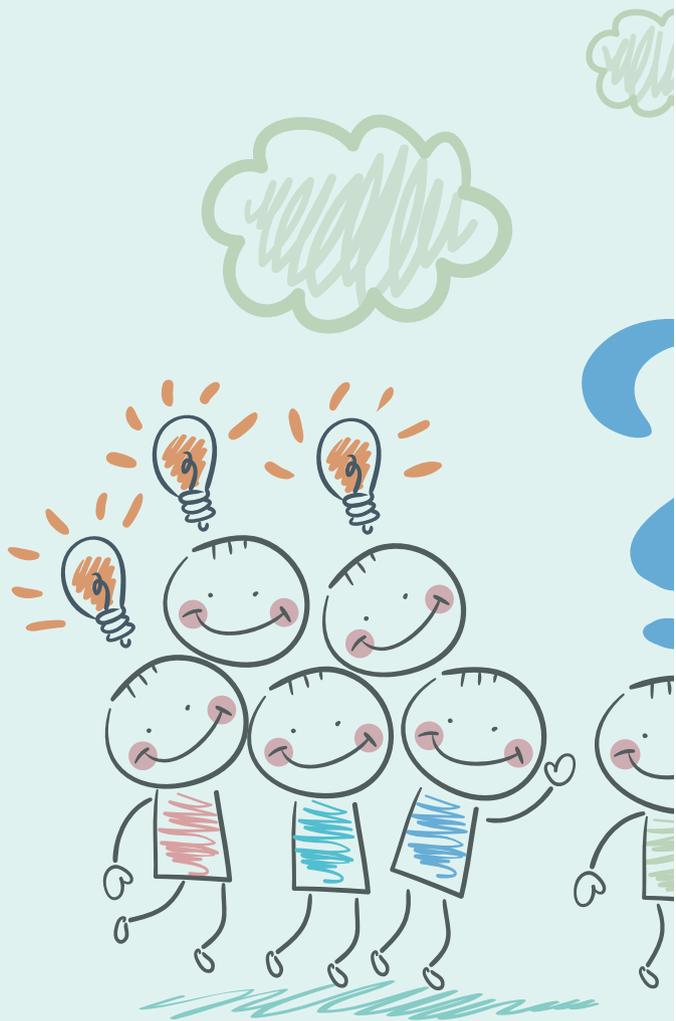


*Iben Sandahl is the bestselling author of [The Danish Way Of Parenting: A Guide To Raising The Happiest Kids in the World](#).*

*She is a professional parenting expert, narrative psychotherapist MPF, family counselor, teacher and speaker. She has more than 20 years of experienced insight into child psychology and education, which in a most natural way anchor the Danish way of practicing parenthood.*

*For more information about her lectures or new happenings visit her website: [www.ibensandahl.com](http://www.ibensandahl.com)*

*You can also find her on [Facebook \(thedanishway\)](#) or [Instagram \(thedanishway\)](#) for more inspiration about parenting.*





# ASPECTS OF BUILDING DEMOCRACY IN DANISH SCHOOLS

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*"I often had problems with one of the other girls in the class when I started school but because of the time we spent together in "Klassens tid" it changed. My class teacher asked all of us how we felt - based on the way we rated ourselves on the satisfaction-barometer – and in that way it was more easy to talk about what we really felt.*

*I liked that the classmates always helped to find solutions on how not to misunderstand each other. We made class rules when discussing what's important to make sure everybody feels good in school. We had a lot of "hygge" as well.*

Quote from a student about the benefits from Klassens tid, Nicole.

