

Comment

an edited version of a talk given on Channel 4 Television in 1992

In 1989 I began a year as a ‘guest teacher’ of English at a number of schools in Denmark. It was quite an experience. Two things in particular struck me about Danish Schools. The most obvious was how much can be done with adequate funding. The other thing I noticed was just how happy teenagers seemed to be – happy, sociable, hard-working and somehow more responsible. So why the difference?

In Denmark, as in many other countries, children up to the age of sixteen work together in the same form, that is to say in the same group of pupils who do all their lessons together. And they do most of their lessons in the same form-room. It’s rather like the system used in primary schools here in Britain.

In England secondary school children tend to be ‘setted’ according to ability. Setting does make teaching easier in some ways, and there is less risk of boring the very bright or overfacing the less academic, especially in our relatively large classes where individual attention is at a premium. But it is possible for children to be in different groups for almost every subject. It is also impossible for them to use their own form room for much of the time.

There are also other disadvantages to the English system. If pupils are in different sets for each subject, then it is more difficult for teachers to find out what their colleagues are doing, and therefore any cross-curricular work becomes an organisational nightmare.

A more serious problem is that setting adds to the social mayhem that teachers in England seem to regard as quite normal. Every half hour or so some bureaucrat, or more probably a machine, rings a bell and several hundred children who would otherwise have been quite happy to carry on with their English composition, or finish off a design sketch, have to clear away their equipment, leave work unfinished and scamper off to the other end of the building for another class. Of course teachers are trained in the art of re-motivating their pupils at the beginning of each lesson, but all the clearing away, moving from room to room and getting started again does take up a lot of time and effort. It is also very unsettling and demotivating.

Imagine office workers having to completely clear their desks and log out of their computers every hour in order to move to another department on a different floor of the building. It is crazy. No wonder so many children seem so anxious and demotivated. For some, nothing ever gets finished and so nothing is ever really worth starting.

Children and teenagers need security in order to develop socially and in order to do their school work properly. At least to the end of their third year in secondary school, and as much as possible thereafter, they should be taught as a form, and in their own form room. They should have their own desks, their own chairs, somewhere safe to keep their books and unfinished work, and they should study together with a familiar group.

In Denmark I used to look forward to my day's work at school and I believe that the overwhelming majority of the children did too. I think that is one of the reasons why so many more Danes have traditionally stayed on in full time education after the age of sixteen than their English counterparts.