

Denmark

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Introduction

Overview of Education System

Education is compulsory in Denmark for children aged 6 to 16 (Grades 0 to 9). School grades are defined by age cohorts, and children are normally enrolled in Grade 0 the year they turn 6. An optional year (Grade 10) is possible for students before moving on to higher education. Children are not required to attend school to receive their education. They can be educated at home, though few parents make use of this option.^a The education these children receive must meet the same standard as offered by the Danish public schools. Public school is called *folkeskolen* (literally, school for the people) and is free of charge. Private schooling is supported publicly with 76 percent of the expenses per student in public schools; the rest is paid by the parents with a minimum of 1/8 of the public grant. Danish is the language of instruction in public schools and most international and private schools.

Danish primary and lower secondary schools are combined into one unified school, called *grundskolen*, covering Grades 0 to 10. Children begin in preschool (Grade 0) and then continue to primary education (Grades 1 to 6, corresponding to International Standard Classification of Education [ISCED] Level 1) and lower secondary education (Grades 7 to 10, corresponding to ISCED Level 2). There is no tracking and almost no grade retention,¹ although some students are held back a grade because of challenges with language acquisition. Students automatically continue to the next grade level and only repeat the same grade in special circumstances (normally due to immaturity). Approximately 4 percent of students repeat a year during Grades 0 to 3.²

Before compulsory schooling, children aged 3 to 6 can attend preschool programs (day-care/nursery and kindergarten), and approximately 96 percent of children do so.³ These preschool

^a However, according to *Foreningen for hjemmeundervisere i Danmark* (the Union of Home Educators in Denmark), the number of students being educated at home has doubled from 2017 to 2020. In 2020, 719 students were educated at home, equaling 1 in 1,000 (in 2019). See <https://www.uvm.dk/publikationer/folkeskolen/2018-undersogelse-af-hjemmeundervisning--fravaer-og-boern-uden-for-undervisningstilbud> for more information.

programs support children’s language acquisition and interaction with language through predominantly explorative and informal approaches.⁴

Public school is regulated by *Folkeskoleloven* (the Folkeskole Act, part of the Education Act), which provides an overall framework for the Danish school system. Public schools are administered by municipalities. Within the framework of the law, each of the 98 municipalities in Denmark can make decisions about its public schools, including decisions about economic resources and the structure of the school system. The national curriculum is described in the Common Objectives,⁵ and each municipality is responsible for ensuring that its schools meet these objectives. Each school has its own school board comprising mostly parents but also including students, teachers, school management, and, if desired, a representative from the municipality. The municipality can delegate decisions to the school board, but it must ensure that each school meets relevant legal requirements. The school board conducts its activities within the objectives and framework set by national legislation, but the municipalities can establish general principles for all aspects of the school’s activities except affairs concerning individual staff or students.

Since the introduction of compulsory education in Denmark in 1814, private schools have also been part of the Danish education tradition. Private schools are regulated by the Private Independent Schools Act.⁶ This act states that to receive public funding, a private school must be economically independent (a self-governing institution), formulate its own core values, and make these values public. Private schools should provide education that meets the standard of public education, as defined by the Folkeskole Act. They should deliver this education according to their own core values and within the framework defined by the Folkeskole Act and the Private Independent Schools Act. The Ministry of Education monitors whether private schools meet these requirements and can sanction a school by withdrawing public funding. Students in private schools take the same school leaving examinations as students in public school, unless the school has notified the Ministry of Education that, because of its specific values or target group, it does not conduct examinations.

In the 2020–2021 academic year, 687,810 students were enrolled in compulsory education (Grades 0 to 9), and another 37,180 completed optional Grade 10.⁷ Among students in Grades 0 to 9 in 2020, 78.5 percent attended public schools, 18.1 percent attended private independent schools, 1.4 percent attended continuation schools (boarding schools for Grades 9 and 10 only), and 2 percent received instruction in other education contexts (for example, in special education schools, in treatment centers, or at home). The percentage of students attending public schools decreased slightly (from 78.8 percent in 2018–2019) and increased slightly for private schools (from 17.8 percent in 2018–2019).⁸

In 2020, 1,080 public schools, 551 private schools, 244 continuation schools, and 123 special education schools were registered, along with 172 day-care programs and treatment schools.⁹ In 2019, the average class size across all school types was 21.2 students, with an average class size of 21.7 students in public schools and 19.8 in private schools.¹⁰ The average school size overall was

372 students (Grades 0 to 10), with an average school size of 491 students for public schools and 197 students across private independent schools and continuation schools.

Since the 1960s, immigration from Western and non-Western countries has resulted in an increasing number of people who speak Danish as a second language. In October 2020, immigrants and their descendants constituted 14 percent of the Danish population (increased from 12.8 percent in December 2016), and immigrants from non-Western countries constituted 8.9 percent of the population (increased from 8.2 percent in December 2016).¹¹ If necessary, students can receive instruction in Danish as a second language, which includes both linguistic and cultural dimensions.^b

Literacy has been a major focus in Denmark since 1994, when the Danish results from the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA)'s Reading Literacy Study (IEA-RL) caused a shock throughout the Danish education system. The subsequent debate gave rise to several national and local initiatives, and there is an ongoing focus on literacy development, particularly in the field of reading comprehension.

Over the past two decades, the Danish Ministry of Education has funded many initiatives, research programs, and reading campaigns to strengthen student literacy. Recent amendments to the 2005 national plan of action to promote reading literacy include the implementation of language screenings of 3-year-old children by municipalities, mandatory language screenings of all 6-year-old children when they begin Grade 0,¹² as well as mandatory national tests¹³ and school leaving examinations in reading.¹⁴ Additionally, preschool teachers (Grade 0) at schools with more than 30 percent of students from so-called marginalized residential areas must administer special language tests on their students to check if students are ready to continue to Grade 1.¹⁵

Danish L1 is by far the subject taught the most in school (330 hours of instruction a year in Grades 1 and 2, 270 hours in Grade 3, and 210 hours in Grades 4 to 9) and comprises more than twice as many hours as the second largest subject (mathematics).¹⁶

The Danish curriculum has placed a greater emphasis on subject-specific literacy within Danish reading instruction. Many municipalities also have listed reading as a priority and many schools have implemented literacy improvement initiatives (particularly involving the reading of expository texts in all subject areas). Furthermore, the curriculum has been updated to include familiarity with information technology, the use of online resources, computer-based writing, and the study of informatics.¹⁷

^b The number of lessons in Danish as a second language is determined in accordance with the needs of the individual student. Students may receive instruction outside the classroom by a second language specialist or be referred to small-group or individual tutoring. Students with one parent from an EU country residing in Denmark can receive mother tongue teaching for a fee if there are "sufficient students" within the municipality to form a class. See <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/ta/2014/689> for more information.

Use and Impact of PIRLS

Since the publication of IEA's Reading Literacy Study results in 1994, reading instruction in primary school has received considerable attention in the Danish political arena.^{18,19} Most municipalities now work with action plans for reading, while initiatives at the local and national level have focused on efforts such as providing continuing education for reading teachers. In particular, the reading of expository texts in all subjects has gained considerable attention. Development projects initiated by organizations such as the Danish Union of Teachers (*Danmarks Lærerforening*) have aimed to enhance the performance of low achieving students. Efforts to improve teacher education and reading instruction based on data from previous PIRLS cycles (e.g., the National Centre for Reading and the National Reading Initiative Award) are ongoing. Almost every public school today has one or more teachers with a professional development course in reading (e.g., reading counsellors).

The degree to which recent initiatives are due to PIRLS or other international and national assessments is difficult to determine. For example, studies like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and national tests in reading have contributed to an ongoing public discussion about the quality of the education system.

Even though PIRLS 2011 results showed that there is no clear relationship between the amount of time spent on classroom instruction and students' reading achievement, the Danish Ministry of Education has based parts of its 2014 school reform on the assumption that more teaching hours will improve student achievement. PIRLS 2016 results showed a slight decrease in Danish students' reading achievement, which caused some political discussion about the 2014 school reform.

The comprehensive school reform placed a major change and challenge on schools, teachers, students, and parents alike, and results from the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2019 (showing a substantial decrease in Danish students' mathematics achievement compared to the last cycle in 2015) continue to contribute to public discussion of the reform. The focus on improving Danish literacy skills is ongoing.

The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

Reading Policy

In PIRLS 2021, Denmark assessed students in fourth grade. The current national reading policy is published in the Ministry's Common Objectives. Since the introduction of the Common Objectives in 2003, the teaching of every subject in public school has been aligned to specific national goals. Following the revision of the Common Objectives in 2009 and the reform of the Folkeskole Act in 2014, the revised Common Objectives were introduced in 2015. They are competence-based and consist of four competency areas: Reading, Written Composition, Communication, and Interpretation.²⁰ Each competency area is divided into four levels covering

Grades 1–2, 3–4, 5–6, and 7–9, and each level is further divided into five or six more detailed descriptions of knowledge and skills.

The national curriculum includes broad subjects encompassing a wide range of competencies and topic areas, from early reading, information literacy, and critical discourse analysis to multimodal production, critical technology literacy, and basic knowledge of Norwegian and Swedish. It also includes reading, analysis, and interpretation of literature and other aesthetic texts.

After the national curriculum was criticized for enforcing a rigid and instrumentalist approach to literacy learning, the knowledge and skills sub goals were reframed as guidelines (not compulsory) in 2019.

The Common Objectives do not define or prescribe specific content and teaching materials; rather, a variety of school practices exist across the country. The establishment of locally anchored reading policies is important for the development of the reading level in each municipality.

Danish Instruction

Danish reading instruction includes four competency areas: Reading, Written Composition, Communication, and Interpretation. Instruction in these areas follows intermediate goals and optional guidelines structured as two courses for primary schools, covering Grades 1 and 2 and Grades 3 and 4. The primary goal of Danish instruction is to cultivate students' experience of language as a source of developing a personal and cultural identity based on aesthetic, ethical, and historical understanding.

To fulfill the Reading competency area, students should be able to read simple texts with confidence and use them in everyday life by the end of second grade. By the end of fourth grade, students should be able to read multimodal texts for the purposes of literary experience and acquiring and using information.

The curriculum describes the minimum level within the skills and knowledge objectives that a student must reach to be able to follow instruction in class (so-called points of attention). By the end of Grades 2 and 4, the acquisition of decoding skills is one such point of attention.

Summary of National Curriculum

Curriculum for Preprimary Education

Kindergarten classes have been a part of the *Folkeskole* for more than 60 years. The first kindergarten class started in 1912,²¹ and in the 1960s classes at this level became more common in the municipalities.²² Since 2009, one year of kindergarten (renamed Grade 0 in 2014) is compulsory. Preprimary education is not divided into subjects; rather, since 2003, instruction in kindergarten refers to six interconnected competency areas and, since 2014, to the competency objectives and the skills and knowledge objectives that prepare students for school. These competency areas are Language, Mathematical Awareness, Scientific Phenomena, Creativity and Musical Forms of Expression, Body and Movement, and Commitment and Solidarity.²³ For the

Language area, by the end of Grade 0, students should be aware of different ways to use language. Students should, according to the skills and knowledge objectives for reading, be able to experiment with reading small texts on different media and learn about reading direction and simple word reading strategies. The point of attention in Grade 0 regarding language is recognizing the shapes, names, and sounds of letters (except q, w, x, and z).²⁴

Emphasis is on learning through play and play-related activities as a means of stimulating students' love of learning and of other school-like activities. In this way, Grade 0 maintains its character of an intermediate year that bridges themes from the preschool curriculum with the teaching of separate subjects at school. A kindergarten teacher who only teaches this grade usually leads Grade 0, whereas the L1 teacher in first grade usually teaches the class for three to five years before moving to a different class.

The curriculum for Grade 0 does not require structured instruction in reading and writing; however, reading is one of the skills and knowledge objectives for this grade.²⁵ The aim to strengthen the linguistic skills that are crucial for student reading development was put forward in 2009 and is still a focus today. The curriculum for Grade 0 emphasizes developing students' general language awareness through dialogue and practicing communication roles such as telling structured stories, listening to and engaging in the teacher's reading, and learning about the narrative structure of factual and fictional texts. Furthermore, the curriculum focuses on systematically developing and increasing student vocabulary and students' awareness of rhymes, phonemes, and word formation, as well as introducing the names, shapes, and sounds of the letters. Students are encouraged to experiment with reading and writing on paper and computer, and with different everyday texts such as wish lists and recipes. Reading activities should be implemented in a playful manner while encouraging the development of a basic mastery of the alphabetical principle that enables students to read simple words with standard pronunciation. Language stimulating activities also form part of all other competency areas (e.g., learning of mathematical vocabulary).²⁶

The curriculum for Grade 0 is based on students' preliminary experience and knowledge of digital media prior to enrollment in school. Digital media is thus included in instruction in both a playing and didactic context, in which students acquire basic Information Technology (IT) skills (e.g., by experimental writing and reading or by recording and editing short films). Motivation and interest in reading and writing should be encouraged, and digital texts such as those on webpages, in computer games, and in ebooks should be available for students and included in instruction.²⁷

Danish Instruction in Grades 1 and 2

In the curriculum guidelines for Grades 1 and 2, the development of elementary reading, writing, and spelling skills is seen as multiple parallel processes that supplement each other. The curriculum emphasizes the importance of direct instruction in the names, shapes, and sounds of letters and their combination to form words. Because the development of basic reading comprehension based

on literary experience and enjoyment of reading is central at this stage, students are presented with a variety of simple literary and informational texts in print and on the computer to read alone, aloud in class, with a partner, or in a small group.²⁸ Instruction in basic spelling and reading strategies should gradually enable students to read age-appropriate texts on their own.

Since the revision of the Common Objectives in 2009, students in Grades 1 and 2 are expected to learn the names, shapes, and sounds of letters in preschool; the curriculum guidelines for the first few grades of primary education emphasize further reading development by teaching students how to apply these skills in basic decoding strategies. Additionally, students should be instructed in the use of simple reading comprehension strategies (e.g., using headings and pictures to enhance understanding of the text) to gain knowledge.

At the end of second grade, students should be able to do the following: apply the shapes, sounds, and combinations of letters with a confident and automatized use of decoding strategies (for standard pronunciation and context-determined pronunciation); retrieve appropriate texts on paper and online; read simple, age-appropriate literary and informational texts; learn and use simple prereading strategies (e.g., ask questions about personal expectations from the text); use basic comprehension strategies; begin to monitor their language and reading comprehension (e.g., by identifying unknown words); and demonstrate an understanding of what they have read and present it orally. By the end of second grade, students who still have major decoding difficulties despite good reading initiatives receive support in order to get access to age-appropriate knowledge and literary experience.

The use of IT and media in Grades 1 to 9 falls under four themes: information seeking and data collection, production and presentation, analysis and communication, and knowledge sharing and collaboration.

Exhibit 1 shows the reading skills and knowledge objectives based on the Common Objectives for students at the end of second grade.²⁹

Exhibit 1: Reading Skills and Knowledge Objectives by the End of Grade 2

Phase 1	Phase 2
Text Retrieval	
Choose a text from a minor selection based on knowledge about the difficulty of texts	Find texts by navigating on age-appropriate home pages by learning about webpage structure
Preparation for Reading	
Prepare reading in classroom conversations by learning about ways to gain prior understanding	Learn and use simple prereading strategies
Decoding Skills	
Read words in Grade 2 texts confidently by learning about context-determined pronunciation of letters and the spelling and meaning of words	
Language Comprehension	
Identify unknown words in written and spoken sources by learning about words and expressions in instructions and tasks	Understand the meaning of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in context by learning about differences and similarities in the meanings of words
Reading Comprehension	
Reproduce the content of a Grade 2 text by learning about the structure of literary and informational texts	Combine text and background knowledge to gain coherent understanding by learning about the interaction between text and reader
Context and Coherence	
Compare the subject of a text with personal knowledge, experiences, and ideas	Relate to the subject of a text by learning about simple reflection questions

Danish Instruction in Grades 3 and 4

The curriculum for students in Grades 3 and 4 focuses on reading purposes and comprehension. By reading literary and informational texts, students at these grade levels are engaged in different reading purposes. Reading as a tool for gaining knowledge is emphasized and in this context, more and more multimodal texts are used. Students also work on building decoding skills and adjusting reading speed and technique to the type of text. Developing students' ability to read and understand expository texts across subjects is the responsibility of the entire teaching staff.³⁰ Thus, students learn skills to use before, during, and after reading and how to monitor their understanding of unknown words. Students also write original texts based on what they have read in order to communicate their own ideas and feelings.

At the end of fourth grade, students should be able to read print and digital literary and informational texts with good comprehension; master different decoding and comprehension strategies; and adjust search strategies based on reading purpose, genre, text difficulty, and text type (e.g., print and digital formats). They also should be able to find relevant information on age-appropriate websites and assess the relevance and credibility of the information. Students are

expected to organize their background knowledge (e.g., by using templates and diagrams), distinguish between different reading purposes, draw on prior knowledge, and search for definitions of key words they do not understand.³¹ Students learn to monitor their reading comprehension by making inferences and revising previous knowledge, and they work with interpretation of a text’s content, purpose, or message. Students also should develop and sustain appropriate reading habits and should be able to read simple Swedish and Norwegian texts. During their school time, students should become acquainted with the Danish literature canon, which consists of Danish folk songs and works of 14 Danish authors. Exhibit 2 shows the reading skills and knowledge objectives for students at the end of fourth grade.

Exhibit 2: Reading Skills and Knowledge Objectives by the End of Grade 4

Phase 1	Phase 2
Text Retrieval	
Navigate on age-appropriate webpages and library resources by learning about search criteria and webpage structure	Evaluate webpage relevance based on search criteria by learning about simple source-critical methods
Preparation for Reading	
Organize background knowledge by learning about relevant methods	Formulate simple reading purposes, such as reading for literary experience and reading for acquiring information
Decoding Skills	
Read Grade 4 texts fast and confidently by learning about composite words, word classes, and inflection of words	
Language Comprehension	
Clarify word meanings by learning about the structure and function of dictionaries and encyclopedias	Create coherent text understanding by learning about and applying wider and narrower terms
Reading Comprehension	
Identify the elements that create text coherence by learning about cohesive ties	Cope with comprehension difficulties by learning about reading comprehension strategies
Context and Coherence	
Discuss the content and meaning of a text by learning about its communicational function	Report and reproduce personal ideas about the situations and context of a text by learning about visualization methods

Reading Instruction in the Primary Grades

Instructional Materials

Individual teachers have a great deal of freedom and flexibility in choosing their instructional methods and materials, as the national curriculum does not prescribe specific materials or methods for reading instruction. Danish teachers often incorporate a variety of materials into their teaching.

Although Denmark is a small country with a population of 5.8 million people, teachers may choose from a wealth of material when planning their reading instruction. However, because an increasing number of Danish schools offer online or digital instruction, decisions on how to prioritize learning resources are mostly made at the municipality level. This typically results in a school using one digital platform per subject to reduce costs, limiting the individual teacher's choice to use other material.³² Furthermore, recent research has shown that likely more than 60 percent of teachers in Grades 1 to 3 use one phonics-based reading instruction resource in particular—*Den første læsning*, The First Reading.³³

A series of textbooks typically contains readers, workbooks, teacher's manuals, and supplementary materials such as audiovisual material, songbooks, games, and apps. Some teachers use published materials such as basal readers, while others develop their own instructional materials.

Denmark does not have a central authority that assesses instructional materials; rather, it is the responsibility of school principals to evaluate the quality and usability of textbooks and other teaching materials. The Danish Ministry of Education provides sample methods and materials on its website and on EMU.dk, a collection of educational materials and online resources for the Danish education system. This portal conveys information about best teaching practices and has more than 2 million visits a year.

The 2014 establishment of educational learning centers (*pædagogiske læringscentre*) has led to further development of school libraries. Together with centers for teaching resources, educational learning centers provide access to learning resources including books, ebooks, and other digital resources. Web-based services^c can help users evaluate the quality of digital teaching resources.

Use of Technology

The use of computer technology is a priority in *folkeskolen*. The Danish Ministry of Education encourages the use of IT and digital media as an integral part of the curriculum. Grants allocated since 2000 to allow Danish schools to access resources that will enable online instruction—computers, tablets, interactive whiteboards, digital learning materials, professional development for teachers, etc.—mean that schools generally are well equipped with computers and/or tablets. Most schools have a device for every—or every other—student, as well as for every teacher. Furthermore, schools generally have broadband internet access, and there is a robust market for online learning materials due to massive investments in the last decade from the government and publishing houses. In 2020, Denmark was a leader in public digitalization.^{34,35} According to the OECD,³⁶ 95.3 percent of all households in Denmark have access to the internet (eighth highest worldwide), and 93.1 percent of all households have a computer. Despite this, teachers still ask for professional development around online instruction.³⁷

^c See www.vurdigi.dk for an example of such a web-based service.

In 2015, 10 percent of all learning materials used in Grades 1 to 3, 22 percent in Grades 4 to 6, and 50 percent in Grades 7 to 10 were digital.³⁸ In 2018, more than 80 percent of teachers stated they used and paid “very much attention” to using Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in their teaching.³⁹ IT and digital media are covered as separate skills and knowledge objectives in the national curriculum for all grades.⁴⁰ There has been ongoing discussion about whether computing, informatics, or programming should be introduced as separate subjects or integrated into existing subjects.⁴¹

Role of Reading Specialists

Every municipality has centrally placed reading (or literacy) consultants (*læsekonsulenter*). They play a key role in developing the reading and literacy strategy within each municipality. These specialists develop evidence-based action plans for students with reading difficulties, provide counselling on dyslexia, and assist literacy counsellors (*læsevejledere*) and test administrators in assessing and reporting dyslexia. Reading consultants also may assist schools with selecting methods of reading instruction, finding relevant research and learning materials, including students with reading difficulties in regular classroom activities, and monitoring the reading level of the school each year.⁴²

Literacy counsellors (*læsevejledere*) are employed at the school level and are typically teachers with an additional qualification in Literacy Counselling in *grundskolen* or a similar educational background. They are typically also L1 teachers. While their work is similar in nature to that of reading consultants, these specialists focus on individual schools rather than municipalities. Literacy counsellors help students with and without reading difficulties build their reading and writing skills. They are also involved in coordinating efforts concerning students with dyslexia, implementing reading assessments, and using compensatory IT. A national goal is to have at least one literacy counsellor at every school⁴³ and approximately 90 percent of all Danish public schools have a reading counsellor.

Accommodation Policies for Instruction and Testing

In 2012, Denmark’s education policy on inclusion and special needs education was revised with the aim of including 96 percent of all students in regular classrooms by 2015.⁴⁴ However, this objective was abandoned in 2016.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, there is a strong political desire for including as many students as possible in regular classes. Students who need fewer than nine hours of remedial instruction per week typically remain in regular classes, where they receive supplemental instruction in specific subject areas as needed. However, students who need more than nine hours of remedial instruction per week may attend special education classes within their regular school or in a special education school.⁴⁶ During the 2019–2020 academic year, the rate of inclusion was 94.42 percent, comprising 97 percent of girls and 92 percent of boys.⁴⁷ Because the 2014 Folkeskole Act requires teaching to focus on the needs of individual students, the aim of 96 percent of included

students into ordinary education implies that teachers must modify their classroom instruction methods to meet the goal.

The provisions of the Folkeskole Act regarding aims, curricula, evaluations, and examinations apply to all students. Adjustments to these provisions (e.g., accommodations for testing, the use of special training materials and technical resources) are made by the Ministry of Education.⁴⁸ Students with reading difficulties may be granted extended time or use their school's usual IT tools during national assessments without an adjustment to the provisions. While all teachers are encouraged to implement IT in their instruction, many schools assign compensatory IT tools to students who have been identified as dyslexic, particularly in Grades 3 and 4. Students, teachers, and parents must all be educated in the use of these tools, the settings of which must be adjusted as the students' skills develop.

School principals must ensure that students with physical or mental disabilities receive special accommodations enabling them to achieve test results that are indicative of their academic level. Occasionally, students are exempted from the national tests based on a recommendation from their teacher. All special accommodations for and exemptions from testing must be made in accordance with the school principal and the student's parents and teachers.

Professional Development Requirements and Programs

Teacher Education Specific to Reading

Danish teacher education is characterized by the broadness of the curriculum; the in-depth nature of study; and the integration of theory and practice in pedagogy, school subjects, and teaching practice.⁴⁹ Six university colleges throughout the country offer a professional bachelor's degree program in education requiring four years of study (equivalent to 240 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, or ECTS, credits, with 30 ECTS credits from student teaching). The Quota 1 admission requirements for these institutions are comparable to those of Danish universities: completion of UNESCO's ISCED Level 3A and, as of 2013, a minimum grade point average of C on the ECTS scale.⁵⁰ Applicants also can enter via the so-called Quota 2 program by meeting certain requirements (e.g., completion of upper secondary education with a grade point average of at least D, having relevant and qualifying work or other experience or equivalent experience) and are considered qualified by the institution following an admission interview.⁵¹ Since 2016, about 53 percent of teacher education students entered university colleges through Quota 1, and 47 percent entered through Quota 2 with minor variations.⁵²

Teacher education was reformed as part of the Folkeskole Act reform passed in 2013 (taking effect in 2014), with the aim of strengthening professional standards in order to equip teachers with improved specialized knowledge within their subject area of expertise.⁵³ The teaching subjects are divided by form level (grade group). The comprehensive part is maintained and strengthened by the introduction of Teacher's Basic Professional Competency (*Lærerens grundfaglighed*) as a

mandatory subject for all student teachers to strengthen teachers' ability to promote student development, learning, and well-being in all subject areas.⁵⁴ Student teachers are trained in both pedagogical and social competencies including classroom management, inclusion, identification of social problems, relational competence, and education of second language students. They additionally are trained to promote humanistic values in courses such as Christianity Studies, Life Education, and Citizenship.⁵⁵

Since 2013, one out of three teaching subjects must be Danish L1 or Mathematics, and some university colleges include English. Danish is divided into two age-specialized courses. Student teachers who choose Danish as a teaching subject complete one or both specializations in Danish (i.e., Danish for Grades 1 to 6 and/or Danish for Grades 4 to 10). This division of the teaching subjects follows the *Folkeskole Act's* division of form levels into teams. A teacher specialized in Danish for Grades 1 to 6 can thereby teach students in the preparatory stage (Grades 1 to 3) and the intermediate stage (Grades 4 to 6). Teachers specialized in Danish for Grades 4 to 10 teach students in the intermediate stage and the final years of schooling (Grades 7 to 10).⁵⁶

The competency objectives for student teachers differ for the courses Danish for Grades 1 to 6 and Danish for Grades 4 to 10.⁵⁷ For the former, the student teacher must support the children's reading development by several means: planning and executing activities, differentiating teaching, integrating digital technologies, applying results gained from tests and other evaluations, and organizing the teaching to support second language students' acquisition of reading abilities. Furthermore, the student teacher must acquire knowledge about reading strategies, be able to evaluate critically the learning resources used in the teaching, and produce additional learning material. For Danish for Grades 4 to 10, the student teacher is expected to apply theories on literacy and evaluate and instruct students in their reading comprehension development. The student teacher should be able to apply research-based knowledge about challenges and potential for reading development. The student teacher also must implement results from tests and other methods of assessment to support the student's development in Danish. The relative emphasis on theories of reading acquisition and teaching methods varies from college to college.⁵⁸

According to a 2019 survey conducted for the Danish Teachers' Union, 18.1 percent of all teachers in the *Folkeskole* (the Danish Public School) do not hold a formal teaching qualification. This number has risen substantially since 2012 where 10.3 percent of teachers did not hold a formal teaching qualification. There are rather large regional differences. In some public schools in municipalities on Zealand (the largest island in Denmark) and two southern islands, Lolland and Falster, as many as 1/3 of the teachers do not hold a formal teaching qualification.⁵⁹

Requirements for Ongoing Professional Development in Reading for Teachers

Every university college that offers teacher education programs also provides professional development for teachers, which can range from stand-alone courses in specific subject areas to

continuing education diploma programs. Usually, the school or the teacher pays for this type of professional development.

As part of the Folkeskole Act reform in 2014, the municipalities and the state agreed to require continuing education for teachers, primarily because about 20 percent of all public school teachers at the time lacked formal teaching competency in the subject they taught. In 2014, a national fund for continuing education was initiated to enable the municipalities to provide mandatory ongoing professional development training for teachers.⁶⁰

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

Over the past 10 years, quality assurance of instruction and evaluation of students in primary and lower secondary school has come into focus by means of several national initiatives. The Folkeskole Act requires schools to evaluate student outcomes from instruction in relation to skills and knowledge objectives and the points of attention (i.e., the minimum level within the skills and knowledge objectives that a student must reach to be able to follow instruction in class) as identified by the Ministry of Education's Common Objectives for Danish.⁶¹ The skills and knowledge objectives are presented in stages of academic development that students must achieve in each subject area rather than by specific grade levels.⁶² While these evaluations form the basis for lesson planning and tutoring, it is up to municipalities or schools to choose how to evaluate the implementation of the curriculum.⁶³

General Progress Evaluation

Parents receive a general progress evaluation of their child for each subject.⁶⁴ Beginning in eighth grade, teachers record grades at least twice a year in subjects that require a leaving examination and provide a written report showing the students' academic achievement.⁶⁵ Information about grades is given in writing or, more commonly, verbally at a meeting attended by individual students, their parents, and the teacher. No grades are officially given in Grades 0 to 7 except at a small number of private schools.

Examinations

Since 2009, an assessment of students' language skills has been mandatory at the beginning of Grade 0.⁶⁶ Municipalities decide how to conduct these assessments, the content of which should follow centrally defined recommendations.⁶⁷ All students in fourth grade who were assessed in PIRLS 2021 underwent this language assessment when they were in Grade 0.

The use of commercially available standardized tests to assess primary students' basic reading skills has been common practice for many years. Four standardized tests relating to national standards for expected reading skills are among those often used to test skills such as word recognition and sentence reading.^{68,69,70,71} Generally, teachers are encouraged to perform an

ongoing evaluation of students' reading and writing development, and to formulate objectives for individual students and the class as a whole.

From 2006 to 2021, mandatory national assessment tests^d were conducted in six subjects throughout the primary and lower secondary grades to determine whether the skills and knowledge objectives for each subject area had been met.⁷² Results of these computer-adaptive tests were meant to help teachers plan their instruction for individual students, improve schools' academic standards, and enhance communication with parents. Teachers received guidelines for the evaluation process through EMU.dk, a national learning web portal. Test results comprising a report on overall class performance, students' individual scores, and information for parents about their child's performance were provided electronically.⁷³ Reading tests focused on language comprehension, decoding skills, and reading comprehension were administered in Grades 2, 4, 6, and 8.

Only results at the national level were published; results for individual students, classes, and schools were accessible only by the school.^{74,75} Each municipality had the ability to access the results of the schools within it.

Due to a massive critique of the adaptive assessment design of the national tests,^e revised national tests should be available to schools and teachers in November 2022.

Results from the 2019 national tests in reading (Grades 2, 4, 6, and 8) showed a decrease of 1 to 3 percent of students achieving satisfactory results at all four grades compared to 2018, and about one out of 10 students in eighth grade performed lower than expected. This decrease has been a trend for several years and has resulted in a political agreement in 2019 to increase students' motivation to read.⁷⁶

Student Plans

From 2009 to 2021, individual student plans based on the competency objectives for specific subjects had been mandatory for all grades.⁷⁷ These written plans, updated digitally at least once a year, describe how each student can benefit from classroom instruction and how parents and schools can collaborate to support the student's educational development.^{78,79} Student plans contain individual learning goals, results of ongoing reading evaluations, and a proposed course of action based on these results. Students themselves contribute to the formulation of goals, the evaluation of their own work, and their course of action. Teachers regularly inform students and parents about the student's progress, and school principals contribute to these reports with their opinions. It is up to school principals to facilitate appropriate school-home cooperation. Although these student plans are no longer mandatory, schools are still obligated to track students' academic progress and personal development.

^d The mandatory national tests were changed in fall 2021, thus after PIRLS 2021 data collection.

^e For example, see Bundsgaard, J., & Kreiner, S. (2019). *Undersøgelse af De Nationale Tests måleegenskaber* [Examination of the measuring properties of the National Tests] (2nd ed.). Aarhus Universitet, Danmarks Institut for Pædagogik og Uddannelse.

Special Reading Initiatives

National Initiatives for Reading Instruction

Since the National Action Plan for reading in 2005 and the establishment of the National Centre for Reading in 2006, national initiatives for teaching reading have been ongoing.

Reading of informational texts in all subjects has come into focus during recent years.⁸⁰ Development projects like VIS (an acronym for Knowledge, Instruction, and Strategies in Danish) focus on the reading and learning processes across subjects of students in seventh grade.⁸¹ The goal of these initiatives is to improve cooperation between Danish language teachers and teachers of other subjects so they can integrate comprehension strategies and reading activities in their teaching.

Initiatives for High Achieving Students, Lower Achieving Students, and Closing Achievement Gaps

In 2010, the Ministry of Education initiated a task force to promote talent development in the *folkeskolen* to encourage students to reach their full academic potential rather than simply meeting learning objectives.⁸² One of its recommendations on how to promote the learning potential for high achieving students was to have teachers use differentiated teaching to focus more on students with an increased learning potential. Some of these recommendations, such as raising admission requirements for teacher education programs, have been implemented.⁸³

One example of a special reading initiative for lower achieving students is cross-age tutoring (*læsemakker*), a structured instruction project in which groups of two students read as a team to support each other's learning. Typically, intermediate stage students in Grades 4 to 6 guide younger students in Grades 1 or 2.⁸⁴ Cross-age tutoring activities can take place as part of daily scheduled reading time (*læsebånd*) or during students' leisure time at afterschool centers. While intensive reading courses for dyslexic students have been established at the municipal level, the implementation of reading initiatives still differs among municipalities.⁸⁵

During recent years, several national initiatives have been introduced to help reduce the achievement gap between native and non-native students. A task force formed in 2008 to consult with schools on this effort has become an integrated part of the learning consultants corps.⁸⁶ Since 2014, these consultants have worked with municipalities, day-care centers, schools, afterschool programs, and other organizations on improving non-native students' academic achievement.⁸⁷ They have published a guide (*Styrk sproget*) on how to strengthen language competencies for non-native students.⁸⁸ In 2011, a national plan of action was put forward to raise the academic level of non-native students after results from PISA from the OECD for 2009 showed that 2 out of 5 non-native students lacked functional literacy at the age of 15.^{89,90} An optional national test in Danish as a Second Language was introduced as part of this plan. From the 2012–2013 academic year until 2014–2015, the Danish Ministry of Education allocated grants to 14 schools with a high percentage of non-native students in order to raise the academic achievement for these students. Since then,

schools have been monitoring whether increased focus on teaching Danish as a Second Language enhances student performance.⁹¹

Finally, the Ministry of Culture collaborated with public libraries for the 2020–2021 academic year to increase students’ motivation to read. The initiative had a budget of 7 million Danish kroner.⁹² This effort is ongoing.

Research on Danish Students’ Reading

Following up on a study of reading habits conducted by the Centre for Children’s Literature in 2000, a Danish PhD project studied approximately 2,000 Danish students’ leisure time reading (aged 9 to 12; 1,423 L1 students and 560 L2 students). The project found that 62 percent of the students indicated a “love of reading,” while 38 percent expressed a lack of interest in reading.

The changes in reading habits from 2000 to 2010 show that more children read regularly (on a weekly basis), while fewer children read on a daily basis. The increase in time spent on reading is particularly evident among children in Grades 4 and 5. Furthermore, the percentage of children who rarely or never read remained constant at 25 percent in the decade from 2000 to 2010.⁹³

This study also showed that the students were aware of the importance of being able to read in order to succeed, but they lack time and interesting books. Furthermore, the study showed that girls read more than boys. It also showed that L2 students were more challenged than L1 students when it comes to reading. Another part of the study identified text type and genre preferences of children in this age group. Horror and humor texts especially appealed to most children in the study across gender and ethnicity. Book series and fantasy texts were also popular.

In 2017, the Policy Institute initiated The Libraries of the Future study, which is the largest study in Denmark of students’ reading habits from Grades 3 to 7.⁹⁴ A total of 8,721 students from 110 different and representative Danish schools participated in the quantitative part of the study. The sample design was based on clusters: school size (small/large), school type (public/private), and geography (the five regions in Denmark). The research showed that the students generally felt more positive than negative toward reading, but also that they (mainly girls) read a bit less compared to 2010. The students also stated that they would read more if the school days were shorter (fourth grade students in Denmark normally finish school around 2 p.m. and then go to afterschool clubs). Reading was mainly inspired by movies, friends, and the students’ mothers. In a focus group study of Danish children aged 13 and 14, the children reported that they preferred printed books as their favorite reading medium.⁹⁵

Twenty-eight sixth grade students participated in the qualitative part of The Libraries of the Future study. Most of the students read literature at school, and they only read books in their spare time “when every other option was not possible” or during weekends and holidays, mainly because adults encouraged it; finally, they found reading fiction challenging. They preferred printed books over digital ones when reading fiction. Students read more frequently in schools where teachers or other school personnel spoke about reading, and visiting the library was mainly

due to adults taking the initiative. The study emphasized the role of adults in helping students develop a reading culture. Generally, the students viewed the book as old fashioned and preferred digital media in their spare time. Regarding informational texts, the students tended to believe what they read online.

Every year, the Book Panel, a Danish Ministry for Culture initiative, presents a report on the latest developments in the Danish book market. The panel consists of researchers from Danish universities and university colleges. Nine out of 10 “Top Ten” bestsellers for children in 2019 were written by Danish authors, and the top five audiobooks were children’s books, with an average of almost 2,300 loans per title.⁹⁶ The latest panel report from 2021 stated that reading for both children and adults in their spare time, especially reading longer and coherent texts, generally has decreased over the last decade. Motivation for reading has also decreased.⁹⁷

According to a Children’s Reading study in 2017,⁹⁸ Danish children in Grades 3 to 7 read less. The percentage of children who read several times a week has decreased from 61 percent in 2010 to 56 percent in 2017, and the percentage of children who never read has increased from 25 percent to 30 percent. Girls read more than boys, but the time girls spent on reading has decreased more (9 percent) than for the boys (1 percent).

PIRLS 2016 showed a similar decrease in Danish students’ love for reading: The percentage of students who responded that they enjoy reading very much (36 percent for “Agreed a lot”) was significantly higher in 2011 and 2006. Likewise, the study showed a decrease in Danish students’ reading skills and an increase in the number of weaker readers. In addition, Denmark has the fewest strong readers in the Nordic area.

According to PISA 2018, 16 percent of Danish students do not possess sufficient reading skills when leaving school.^{99,100}

The READ project in the municipality of Aarhus (the second largest city in Denmark) studied the role of parents in children’s reading. Not surprisingly, the research showed that parent engagement with children’s reading, including daily reading together at home, is significantly important.¹⁰¹

In 2018, the Ministry of Education conducted a survey to investigate successful teaching efforts to support students with reading difficulties. The researchers identified and emphasized the following three efforts:¹⁰²

- Learning strategies or reading strategies that invite and prompt activation of the student’s stock of knowledge, reflection, and self-monitoring, e.g., reciprocal teaching (reading)
- Content enhancement, such as empty graphic models to be filled out by students, to support students’ visualization, memory, and comprehension of a text
- Book reading where books are read in unison conducted by the teacher, e.g., dialogic reading

The researchers also identified the following efforts that were not as effective:

- Collaborative learning, in which students interact and discuss texts in small groups, e.g., applying specific reading strategies
- Explicit attention to academic or domain-specific words (both semantic and morphemic)
- ICT supporting tools, such as read aloud programs and tools with visualizing features

All efforts are commonly applied in Danish schools, but the survey sheds light on the effectiveness of the efforts and encourages a reflective and structured use of them.

In 2015, a group from the Danish School of Education at Aarhus University conducted research on what learning materials a stratified cluster sample of Grades 1 to 10 Danish L1 teachers used.¹⁰³ A total of 639 teachers responded, listing 2,132 different titles, which then were analyzed for their content and pedagogical approach.

The analysis revealed several interesting findings, though it is important to note that the object of study was learning materials used and **not** actual teaching. Even though Danish teachers are free to choose which method as well as which learning material to use, a few materials tended to dominate at each level. Likely more than 60 percent of Grades 1 to 3 teachers used one particular phonics-based reading instruction material and different phonics-based spelling materials. Spelling accounted for 29 percent of the content, making it the most dominant category in these grades, and reading instruction was the second largest content area (21 percent). The analysis also showed that the content in Grades 1 to 3 was repetitive, requiring students to find the correct answer based on context or to follow predefined procedures. Analysis further showed that the different content categories were mainly taught in isolation from one another (e.g., reading instruction was not combined with spelling or writing instruction).

Literary analysis dominated instruction content in Grades 4 to 10, along with a substantial amount of phonics-based spelling materials in Grades 4 to 6. Teachers in lower grades mainly used paper-based materials, whereas teachers in higher grades mainly used digital materials. The reading and writing instruction in Grades 4 to 6 shifted toward more focus on reading strategies and the composition of texts, mostly fiction and nonfiction but also some multimodal texts, but still generally through repetition. In Grades 7 to 10, the pedagogical approaches shifted toward a production-oriented and instructive approach.

Overall, the analysis showed a subject was mostly taught through a repetitive pedagogical approach, with content mainly consisting of repetitive spelling instruction and literary analysis. This focus is not in line with the written curriculum.

Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Danish schools have been shut down centrally twice during the pandemic as of the time of this writing. The first shutdown was from March 19, 2020, to April 13, 2020. In this period, “emergency day-care” was offered, meaning that students in Grades 0 to 4 whose parents held critical jobs (firefighters, police officers, checkout assistants, medical staff, etc.) could be taken care of by the school. Municipalities and schools used different kinds of online instruction that was generally limited, often just asking students to solve tasks individually.¹⁰⁴ All afterschool activities were canceled during this period.

When schools gradually reopened in mid-April 2020, only students in Grades 0 to 5 returned to the classroom, whereas students in Grades 6 to 10 continued their schooling online. Classrooms were typically empty by half due to the regulations on the number of square meters per student, and school days were shortened. Students were asked not to interact with students from other classes, the schoolyard was typically divided into zones, and lavatories and entrances were designated for individual classes, with requirements to wash hands and disinfect surfaces several times a day. Students in Grades 6 to 10 were allowed back to school on May 18, 2020. The Ministry of Education canceled all exams in Grades 9 and 10 in *grundskolen* in May and June 2020.

The second shutdown was from December 21, 2020, to February 5, 2021, after which schools again reopened for students in Grades 0 to 4 (they reopened for students in Grades 5 to 10 on April 7, 2021). During this second shutdown period, all students in Grades 0 to 10 received so-called “emergency teaching” online with very big differences in the number of lessons offered. Some schools offered one daily schedule with the teacher, and other schools provided regular lessons online along with different tasks from learning materials. Research indicated that students received more online instruction during the second shutdown and that this instruction was more organized compared to the online instruction during the first shutdown.¹⁰⁵

On February 8, 2021, students in Grades 0 to 4 returned physically to schools. Some schools returned more or less to the normal schedule; others continued with a reduced “emergency schedule.” A few schools were temporarily shut down due to local outbreaks of COVID-19. Students in Grades 9 and 10 in two regions (of five) were allowed back to school every second week (Northern and Western Jutland), and all students on a remote island (Bornholm) were allowed back to school.

As of March 15, 2021, students in Grades 5 to 8 were allowed back to school one day a week only with teaching outdoors, and students in Grades 9 and 10 were allowed back to school every second week, except for students in the regions of Copenhagen and Northern Zealand. All students on non-bridged islands were allowed back to school—again with some partial or total shutdowns for short periods due to local outbreaks of COVID-19.

Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning

According to a survey among teachers after the first shutdown, 7 out of 10 expressed that the shutdown affected student learning negatively,¹⁰⁶ especially for students with special needs and for students from socially disadvantaged homes because their social well-being was affected generally. On the other hand, 1/3 of teachers indicated that high achieving students benefitted from the shutdown due to silence and lack of disturbances.

The online instruction during the shutdown was mostly teacher-centered and guided, and primarily consisted of individual work and solving tasks using the digital learning materials.¹⁰⁷ Fifty-one percent of students in Grades 5 and 8 indicated they learned less (28 percent said the learning outcome was the same, and 21 percent said it was higher). Forty-five percent of students were less motivated to participate in the learning activities, with 33 percent more motivated. However, research revealed a significant increase in students liking their school during the pandemic.¹⁰⁸

A survey on reading habits (primarily among adults) during the shutdowns¹⁰⁹ found an increase in how much the participants read. Findings from the survey also showed that the participants seemed to be less influenced by trends, reporting that they were choosing books based on their own interests and desires.

Finally, a forthcoming follow-up study on the previously mentioned Children's Reading study from 2017 will investigate children's and adolescents' reading habits in light of COVID-19.¹¹⁰

Impact of the Pandemic on PIRLS 2021

The PIRLS 2021 field trial coincided with Denmark's first school shutdown. This resulted in the participation of only 8 (out of 65) classes.

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