

"Even though you believe in something else, you can still be a nice person"

A survey of the collaboration between Danish schools and the Danish Lutheran Church and an evaluation of the use and value of the school services initiated by the Danish Lutheran Church

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The survey was financed by The Education and Research Centre of the Danish Lutheran Church in cooperation with Metropolitan University College, Copenhagen, Denmark. It was carried out between August 2014 and December 2015.

The focus areas of the survey were:

- the relationship between the Danish schools and the Danish Lutheran Church
- the points of contact between the Danish Lutheran Church and children and young people
- the school services of the Danish Lutheran Church, their background, origin, and history - and its relevance for the pupils

This summary contains the following sections:

- A. Introduction
- B. Conclusions
- C. The School, the Church and the Education Act
- D. Representative Extracts from the Interviews

NB: By law, all schools in Denmark teach Christian Studies (lit. 'Knowledge of Christianity') as a school subject at every year level from 6 to 16.

A. Introduction

Brief history

By the year 1050 most Danes had become Christians. At the Reformation Denmark became Protestant Lutheran. The first Danish translation of the Bible was published in 1550. In 1849, the Danish Lutheran Church was constitutionally laid down as 'the Danish people's church'. The population of Denmark is 5.5 million. 77% of these are members of the Danish Lutheran church and pay a tax of 0.7% for its upkeep. There are 11 dioceses (including Greenland), with bishops (including 3 women) presiding over roughly 2,300 parishes and pastors (56% of whom are women).

CSS

Church-School Services (CSS) is the school service from the Danish Lutheran Church, established in the early 1990s and now used by 80% of Danish parishes. Usually a teacher and a pastor are employed, in some places on a full-time basis. Their main task is to develop teaching projects for, and liaise with, 6-16-year-olds in school. The topics are many, but often they include stories from the Bible, a visit to a local church, and also a talk with the local pastor.

CSS fulfils the rules and regulations as well as the provisions of the schools concerning the teaching of religious subjects as opposed to the preaching of Christianity. The school services are based in and controlled by the local parishes and not by a central authority.

The survey describes the characteristics of the subject matter and the teaching approach as well as evaluating their importance for the pupils' learning and the training of teachers.

B. Conclusions

The Perspective of the Danish Lutheran Church

The Danish Lutheran Church is involved with children and young people at many levels, as can be seen from the homepages of the local parishes. They reveal a wide variety of opportunities and activities for all age groups, though with major demographic differences.

Many parishes collaborate with the local schools, often stretching back to the time before CSS. The annual Christmas service for local schools is a strong tradition, while a number of churches offer a guided tour round the church and churchyard for special year groups.

Over 300 churches employ a church and culture secretary, who arranges meetings and clubs for children. Across the country there are also activities arranged by Christian scouts and guides as well as other children and youth organisations in the form of clubs and special services.

Preparation for confirmation around the age of 14 is a strong element in the contact between the church and young people. 71% of Danish youngsters are confirmed annually. In contrast to CSS, confirmation preparation is confessional and ends with a special celebration service for the youngsters and their families.

The Perspective of the Church-School Services (CSS)

The Church-School Services (CSS) are a strong asset for both the churches and the schools.

CSS offer teaching projects to the schools, fully aware that these must be objective in content, and supplemented by a wealth of added resources such as visits to churches, meetings with a pastor, an organist or others from the world of the church, but also meetings with artists, dancers, and actors, using

resources such as games, websites, music, films, and supported by in-service courses for teachers, hymn singing arrangements, and other experiences.

Pupils meet committed pastors, organists, and diaconal and social workers, but also church council members, in other words a church and Christianity in its present reality, and not just as teaching materials.

CSS are also characterized by a constructive and innovative cooperation within their own ranks, sharing materials and experiences and collaborating on new initiatives. At the moment CSS are the only ones involved in a truly professional, educational, and specialist development of teaching religious matters. Lastly, CSS bring together teachers, pupils, pastors, and church people, who 'discover' one another, which opens up for ongoing conversation and further cooperation.

Recommendations

General

1. Church-School Services (CSS) should be established throughout the country, so that all schools and churches can benefit.
2. Future pastors and catechists should be introduced to CSS projects and materials and shown how to use them, as well as how to communicate with children without preaching to them.
3. Student teachers should be taught about CSS and how to make use of them.
4. The Ministry of Church Affairs should ensure a good framework for the local and national work of CSS and allow the local churches to finance this work.
5. The Danish Lutheran Church Education and Research Centre should organize in-service courses for pastors and people working in CSS, possibly in cooperation with the staff from the professional colleges.
6. The Ministry for Children, Young People, Education and Equality should include examples of CSS projects and materials to show how the goals of the Education Act can be realized.
7. Cooperation between local municipalities and CSS should be ensured for the mutual sharing of resources.
8. The school subject should always be referred to by its given name 'Christian Studies' and not just as 'Christianity', which leads to misunderstanding.
9. People outside the church should be encouraged to realise that the church's role in CSS is to teach, not preach.

Specific observations and recommendations

1. Church staff, and especially pastors, should be allowed the opportunity to be involved in projects and to be introduced to the schools, thus becoming resource persons for the teaching of Christianity and other relevant subjects.
2. Pupils demonstrably learn something about the church and Christianity and about many other things. It is not so much learning that produces ready knowledge as learning that strengthens impressions and experiences that are positive and remembered for a long time.
3. CSS also shows that the church can contribute to education in society in general.
4. The collaboration has been a huge success for the church, both internally, because it is rooted locally, and externally, because a window is opened to pupils, teachers, and parents alike with the story that this is a church initiative, yet non-confessional.

Organisation

Information on CSS can be found on websites, showing the planned projects and the thinking behind them.

All projects need time for research, in-depth studies, discussion, and pilot testing. It has proved valuable to have these services anchored locally at the deanery or parish level while working together nationally in a wider forum for inspiration and cooperation on the projects.

Teachers and Choice of Projects

Teachers have very much welcomed the Church-School Services, which have been a great success in schools. The materials, the projects, the offer of visits from guest teachers, artists, dancers, organists, and pastors plus websites and games are seen as relevant by teachers, who appreciate the ease with which they can establish contact with pastors and other people in the religious sphere.

Teachers are aware of the problem of preaching in the classroom, but no respondent has seen it as a real problem. They see the CSS projects – visiting a church or a mosque, trying out a ritual, singing a hymn or two or performing a meditation – as good experience for their pupils. The teachers are present all the time and talk to the pupils about their experiences; they can always intervene if anyone should feel upset or worried.

Of course the teachers can plan lessons just as the Church-School Services do with their projects. But the schools have neither the time nor the money to do so, so we recommend that the churches continue with their work. Despite the limited funds available, there is a huge dissemination potential for the church.

Teachers enjoy teaching Christian Studies and emphasise that the pupils learn about other religions, the vital questions of life, and ethical considerations. They also learn about themselves and how to face the world.

Teachers choose their projects depending partly on what is on offer for the year and partly on what fits into the year plan. No respondent chooses projects based on the subject-goals and the other provisions, but a number express their confidence that the projects have been planned so as to fulfil these goals.

Teachers welcome the projects and the choice of tasks that CSS offer, where a variety is essential to strike a balance between the ready-made project and the actual class.

Pupils

The benefit of working with the projects varies from class to class. Some pupils have gained new knowledge to be used in reflections on their own thoughts, others find it difficult to remember concrete knowledge and cannot formulate any acquired knowledge.

There are clear differences between boys and girls, and in some places a major difference in how they describe the benefit of the projects. Mostly this favoured the boys.

As the pupils grow older they can formulate more precisely what the individual subject is about. They can see more clearly the content and effect of the project and can relate it to general human issues, and especially to themselves.

Older pupils know that they have to learn and acquire knowledge that they can relate. They also partly understand this new knowledge, but find it hard to apply a knowledge platform to examine or evaluate knowledge from *another* area. Often they simply jump to thoughts about their own religion or faith.

At all levels pupils agree that when the subject is Christianity itself, those that have been baptized learn about their own faith, so their view is based on a perspective from within. Most accept that there can be different answers to the same question, but they show little awareness that Christianity has clear answers to many questions.

Pupil Experiences

It is rewarding for the pupils to work with combinations of subject matter and aesthetic learning processes, even when they cannot formulate the link between them. The pupils have had valuable and important *experiences*, but they can be hard to access and even explain. It is hard to point to what has been *learned* when the subject matter and aesthetic learning processes are combined. It is easier to pick up the signs when only the linguistic expressions are in focus. The experiences that make the subject matter come alive are emphasized again and again by the pupils, but what is remembered is hard to define.

We have seen regularly that pupils use the subject-matter (Bible stories, dogmatic concepts, symbols, rituals) as a launch-pad for their own thoughts, after which the subject-matter is discarded.

Learning is not just an intellectual process; often feelings are in play. Pupils talk about happiness and sadness also in regard to the content of the lesson. The school on the other hand focuses mainly on knowledge and skills. If feelings were also part of the subject, the school could be proud of building whole people – certainly as regards the children that we have in school today.

Pupils at all levels really enjoy working with the projects. They are happy that the projects are concerned with different elements and materials from those they normally face, especially when they meet other talented, professional people or are engaged in learning games etc. or visit exhibitions and theatres, and experience the subject being brought alive through other means. The subject-matter is often topical and exciting.

Pupils say their learning is a combination of working in the usual area (reading texts, listening to the teacher's explanations, writing answers) and then all the other ways of learning, where the body and various forms of aesthetic expression lead to thoughtfulness and reflection – such as in music, the use of the senses, or a decision to act in an imagined dilemma.

In our interviews with the children we have not come across a significant amount of *internalized* knowledge. It seems difficult for them to link subject matter to everyday experience and to let this knowledge challenge their aesthetic expression or a deeper understanding of human dilemmas. Some never even see it as a challenge. It is also difficult for children to link different *sets* of knowledge, e.g. comparing Pippi Longstocking and Jesus, or two dogmatic concepts e.g. salvation and forgiveness. The children take on board the elements that they can use in their own thoughts and opinions, but find it hard to compare at a higher level of abstraction.

Best practice

The really good projects are tailored to the level of the children's understanding. Pupils are told what they can expect to learn from a given project and to distinguish between facts and reflection.

Objectivity is a must in the learning process. Pupils must realize not only what is their *own* faith or beliefs, but also what religion may mean for *others* – and they should be able to discuss this *with* others. Perhaps a change of name of the subject – from Christian Studies to Religious Education – would help counter this misinterpretation.

It may seem a paradox that the intention of all involved is to be non-confessional, but the pupils realize very early on that their own faith or beliefs are being discussed. However, they are not concerned at the fact that the project comes from CSS.

Information to Parents

Very few schools have considered giving information to parents about CSS projects, or providing materials in other languages. A brief note about a project sent by the school to parents would encourage them to talk to their children about the project and to make clear that here they meet the church in a non-confessional way.

Projects

Some teachers find themselves challenged when two areas not normally seen together, such as Pippi Longstocking and Jesus mentioned above, or a dogmatic concept and everyday experience. For such projects a teachers' guide would be useful.

Some projects are cross-curricular, i.e. history and Danish. It is important that attention is paid to the teaching goals of the two subjects and also whether both subjects are truly involved in cross-curricular *learning* or just involved in cross-curricular activities.

Of course CSS offer projects where Christianity is in focus, but the subject Christian Studies also includes 'non-Christian religions and other life-views'. Here it is possible to create dialogue and cooperation between other religions and other life-views.

In many of the CSS course projects goals are set which are often teaching rather than learning goals. We recommend that learning goals are set for *all* teaching projects, perhaps converted in relation to the common goals for Christian Studies. The learning goals are a binding reality for school education and are therefore a fundamental element in what is meant by 'on the school's premises'.

It would also be valuable for teachers to reflect on the kinds of interpretation of Christianity the children should meet. In Denmark the Lutheran version is the one most would adhere to, but there are other confessions that should be considered and taught.

Often teachers and pupils think that religion is about 'behaviour', but religion is also about interpretation and the deciphering of daily codes and a semi-private understanding of life and living. An awareness of the view of religion and the understanding of it is important for the planning and execution of the projects.

Perhaps teachers could become more involved in the planning of the projects, perhaps pastors, organists and other church workers too, so that ownership of the projects, in-service courses, and cooperation could be shared by more people. A project could also be tested in the classroom before being given to all interested schools.

CSS may also involve an external consultant as a 'critical friend' in the developmental phase. External consultants with special knowledge and interest in areas of didactics, theology, music, acting and other relevant skills would be valuable both for the project at hand and for further inspiration.

Visiting the Church

Many of the projects include a visit to a church. The pupils visit a room they are not familiar with, and they may meet a pastor whom they do not know either. These visits are viewed very positively by the pupils. All information about the visit including the ages and levels of the pupils should be made available to pastors and church staff alike.

Evaluation

Ideas on how to evaluate projects and their success are needed, including how they fit in with the subject goal. Each project needs to have a specific evaluation guide. This is especially important when it comes to the aesthetic products, such as music, dance, and artwork.

It is also useful to have constructive criticism from the teachers, and a model for this needs to be developed.

Occasionally pupils have produced written feedback on a project and their experiences with it. These materials should be shared with the teachers involved in the same project.

Discussions – Locally and Nationally

Some teachers have expressed curiosity as to why Church-School Services exist at all. We would therefore recommend that CSS together with the Church discuss: How does CSS justify its presence? What role does CSS wish to play in children's lives? The keywords 'visibility', 'culture' and 'Bildung' (moral self-formation) are mentioned in the report, but what do they actually mean?

Many CSS employees already reflect on 'Bildung' teaching and learning in Christian Studies. We recommend that their reflections are also discussed in schools with teachers and parents.

We also recommend that CSS employees discuss among themselves the relationship between teaching specific subjects and general 'Bildung'. Is there a particular content that promotes the goals for 'Bildung' that CSS is aiming at?

CSS are locally based. This is a very central and valuable element in their story. But it remains to be considered what this implies and how it shows in the work of each local CSS. We recommend that this be the subject of reflection.

Usually the projects contain teaching materials in written or pictorial form, posters, music, film, websites, etc. There is an ongoing discussion as to what constitutes good teaching materials based on a general didactic assessment. This also involves an understanding of what the aesthetic learning processes are.

Project Design

Although not intended as a research project, our design applied recognised theories and methods in the validation of a representative choice of cases, the interview aims, and the analysis and interpretation of these. Along the way we have consulted a wide range of relevant literature in our bibliography. Our questionnaires and a catalogue of materials from all CSS participants in the project are available (in Danish only) under 'Rapportens bilag' at <http://www.irenelarsen.dk/skole-kirke/forside.htm>.

C. The School, the Church, and the Education Act

Until 1975, Christianity was taught in schools on behalf of the church, but after 1975, the subject changed and became 'Christian Studies'. Pupils were to learn and gain skills as in all the other subjects of the education system in a non-confessional environment.

Goals for Christian Studies in the 2015 Education Act:

1. Pupils shall gain knowledge and skills that enable them to understand and relate to the importance of the religious dimension for the view of life both for the individual and its relationship to others.
2. Pupils shall learn about and become familiar with Christianity in a historical and contemporary context and know the biblical stories and their importance for the value system in our culture. Pupils shall also learn about other religions and philosophies of life.
3. Pupils shall be able to use their skills in the subject with regard to personal opinions, responsibility and action in a democratic society.

Content of Christian Studies in the 2015 Education Act:

1. Philosophy of life and ethics.
2. Christianity.
3. Biblical stories.
4. Non-Christian religions and other life-views.
5. In the Danish Lutheran Church there is a long tradition for deciding which educational activities are to be initiated in the local parishes, including at which levels. Thus the opportunities in the Danish Lutheran Church are considerable. As mentioned, 71% of 14-year-olds are prepared for confirmation by the church, with weekly lessons for 8 months culminating in a festive service. These are a national phenomenon. Most parishes also provide preparatory confessional teaching for 9 year-olds, called 'mini-confirmands'.

D. Representative Extracts from the Interviews

Teachers' evaluation of CSS materials (... = new speaker)

"I think it's excellent input. They're extremely creative, the people who make these materials for us, I'm very impressed."..."We've been involved in a number of projects and the pupils are never 'at risk'. The materials are well thought through.

Teachers' thoughts on preaching versus teaching

"It was really refreshing with something quite different. I can feel it comes from another place, but I can't quite put my finger on what it actually is"... "There's a lot of ethics and culture"..."When we were in the church, there was no preaching. The pastor simply said, Now we're all here, also our Muslims"..."I mean, of course you can teach without preaching!"

Teachers' view of the church visit

"It's fun for them to come into a church. If there was a mosque or a synagogue a bit closer, I'd also take them there"..." They need to know what a church looks like from the inside and have the opportunity to ask about things. It's not that I want them to believe in God. It's just part of our culture."

Pupil Responses Grades 1-3 (ages 6-9)

On the Good Samaritan: "When you grow up, you should try to be a bit like Jesus."..." You should try to do something for your friends and stuff like that. God talks to Jesus like the brain talks to the body. In a way he's a bit like Jesus' brain before he thinks, I mean when God tells him something, Jesus thinks it too."

On Easter: "You can ask, but no one really knows if Jesus exists. No one can answer that"..."I've been wondering for a long time if you can see God"..."I'd like to know what happens to me when I die – if I can still think"..."Faith is something you decide with your imagination"..."I'd like to see what God looks like, so in a way I'd like to be dead and in a way I wouldn't"..."It's a bit strange, you don't usually come alive after you're dead"..."If you think it really happened, then I get dizzy and I think I can't believe in that, how can I believe in it and how can I not?"..." Those Romans, I didn't like them at all, even though I've been to Rome."

Grades 4-6 (ages 9-12)

On the church visit: "It was really nice to learn some other songs than the ones we know. It was also nice to go for a walk and see some churches and get to know what happens there" ..."I've lived in this town nearly all my life but this is the first time I've been inside a church. I think it was very inspiring, because when I grow up, I want to be an archaeologist. It was really exciting to hear all about the colours and clothes"..."In

church you don't need to be so frightened, because you're not allowed to take weapons in, so then you can express your feelings a little more than you for example at home." (ed. The church porch is literally 'the weapon house' in Danish, dating from when churchgoers had to leave their weapons outside the church before worship).

On feelings: "I actually think that God has really *thought* about feelings. For instance, when I was little, I thought that before I was born, I was a little thing up in heaven and then God sprinkled something down and I became the person I am today" ... "If it's the last break of the day and you've had a quarrel with someone it's really hard to write an essay or do maths if you keep on thinking about it and then you feel like saying, OK, Now I'm going over to sort it out, or No I'm not, I've got to do my work: it's very hard."

Grades 7-9 (ages 12-15)

On the Bible: "I think the reason why we maybe have to learn a bit about it is that we're going to be confirmed soon and then we really need to know if it's something we're going to say yes to and if we believe in the Christian thing, but it's also about learning about other cultures and what other people believe so we have a better understanding of them" ... "It's a bit like how do we behave towards other cultures, 'cos we need to respect what they believe. For instance, there are some orthodox Jews where the men mustn't touch other women and the other way round. You've got to take that into account."

On opinions: "I think it's great to find out what other people think and then see if you yourself aren't a bit in agreement with them. There was someone who said that if you've got an opinion and then you hear other people's opinion you might change to their opinion because you hadn't thought about that before" ... "You don't always have to have an opinion; for example, I think we've all been confirmed those of us sitting here, which means that we think God exists, that's our opinion, it's a big part of Christianity and religion to know what you believe and stuff like that, but it's not everything!"

On religion in Denmark: "Denmark is a Christian country, so it's really good that we know which religion it is that we believe in or have in our country – in depth I mean" ... "You learn about other religions and freedom and then there are other things under those headings. So then you can learn about freedom of speech and stuff like that. There's really a lot of things in Christianity that are important in Denmark" ... "You learn that even though you believe in something else, you can still be a nice person."

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