

# The paradox of parental influence in Danish schools. A Swedish perspective

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In this article I discuss the boards of compulsory schools in mainly Denmark and Sweden to a less extent where parents are in majority. Questions of interest for my study are: Why is parental interest in being elected to school boards so low? Why do teachers react negatively to questions about school boards? How are the various interests of teachers, pupils, parents and politicians balanced in the actual partnership? What impact do neo-liberalism and marketplace policies have on the participation of parents in schools? All the questions emanate from the paradox that traditional Danish ways of ensuring parental influence no longer seem to work with the current type of school boards. Utilizing concepts from the frame factor theory I explore the consequences of this for school boards. Data collection is designed as case studies and the methods used are interviews, participation in board meetings, school visits and document analysis. The conclusion shows that school boards are complex and even contradictory. Politicians' aims regarding boards are not clear. Boards cannot be a relevant response to the political threat from private school policy or a general solution to problems of local democracy.

## Introduction

A school board for compulsory schools where parents are in the majority was introduced in all schools in Denmark in 1990 but as early as 1970 parents was represented in school councils which were obligatory in all schools. This goes back to Denmark's school policy deriving from Grundtvig.

This article is based on theoretical and empirical studies of local school boards where parents are in the majority in Sweden and Denmark. Such boards have existed in compulsory schools in Sweden as part of a pilot scheme since 1996. In this article all the questions emanate from the paradox that in Denmark the historical tradition of parents exercising their influence no longer seems to work with the current type of school boards. My first question is: *Why is parental interest in being elected to school boards so low?* The election at the beginning of 2006 which was for all schools, showed a large fall in interest compared to the previous election in 2002.

The second question is: *Why do teachers react negatively to questions about school boards?* A shift in power occurred when school boards in accordance to the regulations in law should be implemented. This also affected the teachers' influences, which now move limited. The third question of interest is: *How are the various interests of teachers, pupils, parents and politicians balanced in the actual partnership?* A variety of actors is interested in the work in the schools, which can lead to conflicts. One important factor is, therefore, the communication between the board members and the other parents, pupils, school staff and also the politicians. There is a societal interest here that may conflict with the interests of the board. My fourth and last question is: *What impact do neo-liberalism and marketplace policies have on the participation of parents in schools?* In many countries neo-liberalism and marketplace policies have strengthened the status of parents in the partnership and in school politics in general. The definition of partnership implies that the state and other partners work together in agreement and also share responsibility and risk in order to solve various problems in society. The idea of partnership has been influential in this discussion in the US for a long time.

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Today partnership is part of a striving for democracy and citizenship, where mutuality and responsibility are emphasized (Franklin, Bloch, & Popkewitz, 2004). Ravn (2005) calls attention about *social transformation* where the role of parents and partnership can be seen as important for the child's academic achievement.

*New configurations of power in school governance have arisen. These new configurations such as decentralisation, marketisation, accountability, managerialism, professionalisation have an impact on definitions of the social and professional identities of educational agents and on the redistribution of power among them, as well as on the understandings, definitions and practising of the highly praised family school community partnership (ibid, p.454).*

Earlier in two contexts, I have described and analyzed Swedish local school boards where parents are in the majority (Kristoffersson, 2002, 2005). Consequently I found it interesting to research how the historical strong influence of Danish parents expresses itself in the school boards. I will first give a short overview of the pedagogical influence of Grundtvig and also of the law in Denmark regarding parental influence.

### Historical background

The important role of parents in the school as envisaged by Grundtvig has become very significant in Danish school history. He was born in 1783 and died in 1872, and educated to become a theologian. In fact, Grundtvig wanted to have a school for everyone. Back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Grundtvig discussed the importance of parents. His opinion was that it is the parents and not the state that has the responsibility for the child's upbringing and education. The parents also have the right and the duty to improve the child's education in any way they think best. He highlighted, in the government, the parents' right to decide for their children and this has been a determining influence on Danish school law.

Kold was born 1816 and died in 1887. He was a teacher in child schools and today he is best known for Grundtvig- Kolds independent schools. Kold became very interested in Grundtvig's ideas about school and it was he who realized Grundtvig's pedagogical ideas in practice.

Kold's work is fundamental for the organization of Danish compulsory schools.

His school on Fyn became a model for the independent schools (also called the Danish Friskolemodel), and the private 'child schools', which were often started by parents (Andersen, 1990; Bugge, 1965, 1999). Since the law of governing independent school (friskolelagen) in 1855, parents have been able to choose among official schools, private schools or home education for their children. Private schools received financial support from the state. This law gave parents the right to assume the responsibility for their children's upbringing and education (Markussen, 1994). Parents could start their own schools and choose teachers, and in every parish a school commission was set up to be responsible for the schools. Two of the most trustworthy farmers in the parish were representatives on the commission. Politicians and citizens were representatives. The idea was that the citizens' knowledge about the school was important. In the cities parents were not represented. The school policy question during this time then was whether the school should be governed by the municipality or by the parents (Lindbom 1996, Nissen & Skovgaard - Petersen, 1994).

There is a long tradition in Denmark of parents having a voice in schools. The 1933 law for compulsory schools increased parental influence through school councils but the government was not satisfied with these school councils. This affected the school law 1949 which states that parents should be represented in the school commission. Now it was the municipalities which had to decide whether they wanted to implement school councils. In 1970 school councils with parental representation were implemented in all schools. School councils were replaced in 1990 with mandatory school boards, with parents forming a majority.

Parental involvement in the school is seen by the state as a right. The school boards now had the possibility to determine about their own school activity. In 2006 there was very little interest in the school boards. During the election period from 1990 43 % took part, but in the period from 2006 the indication is that only 3, 6 % of the parents took part ([www.skolesamfund.dk](http://www.skolesamfund.dk)). The decrease of interest in the boards in their present form among parents results in the question: Where have Grundtvig's ideas gone?

### Methodology

School boards in Danish compulsory schools are the focus of attention in this study.

There is a critical analysis and discussion of these boards from the perspective of hermeneutics theory (Ödman, 1979). For comparative purpose I use my study from 2002 which includes nine school boards in Sweden (Kristoffersson, 2002). Two Danish school boards were selected with the help of the Danish Parents Association (Skole & Samfund).

The data collection was in the form of case studies. I have found the research of Segerholm (1998); Stake (1995) and Yin (2003) useful in that they believe that a case study provides a collected comprehensive picture of the object of study. During my meeting with the various actors it was important to understand the true meaning of what they said during the interviews. The methods used are interviews, participation in board meetings, school visits and analysis of documents. The aim of the interviews was to understand individual experiences and what it means to be involved in a school board (Kvale, 1997). All informants were given questions so that they could prepare before the interviews. Informants were principals, parents, teachers and pupils. Ten people belonging to the two boards were interviewed. One person from the Danish Parents Association and one person from the Teachers Association were also interviewed. All work on the interview material has been done by the author.

In this study I use frame factor theory as a model for understanding the consequences of policy decisions concerning the implementation of school boards with parents in the majority. The term frame is also useful in understanding and explaining school boards in terms of what regulates them. My interest is to see what influences the work of boards. Are there other social factors which influence them? What kinds of effects do the economic, social and political structures have?

## Results

The results from the two schools are presented thematically. The two schools are my cases and are labelled Lake School and Bridge School respectively in the text. Lake School is a compulsory school, 108 years old, and is situated in a big city. According to the principal pupil numbers are declining. Pupils leave the school to attend private or other municipal schools. Bridge School was built in the middle of the 1960s and refurbished 1996/97. It is located in a suburban area, 20 km from a big city and is such a popular school, that it is unable to accommodate all the pupils who want, to study there.

Currently there are plans for rebuild the school to meet the increasing demand for places.

Both schools have 525 pupils in school years 0-9. Lake School has 36 teachers employed and Bridge School 45 teachers. In Bridge School there are also after-school activities for 225 pupils. Despite of the high pupil numbers (and the many parents available to choose from) at both schools, there is a little interest from the parents in being elected to the boards where they would serve for a period of four years. The two schools have almost the same number of bilingual pupils -Lake School has 16 % and Bridge School 15 %- but there are no immigrant parent representatives on the boards. The board members comprise of seven parents, two pupils, two teachers, the principal and the vice principal who is the secretary. But the principal and vice principle have no right to vote. The agenda is decided by the principal and the chairman of the board together. Board meetings are always held in the evenings and minutes are published on the schools homepage.

### *Lake School board members*

The quality of the education at the school is poor, which means that many pupils leave the school, according to one of the parents interviewed. One parent wants to work with pedagogical questions, another parent adds that most of the boards activity has been about rebuilding and the financial situation at the school. Lake School has had four principals in eight years, which has had a negative effect on the board. It is difficult to maintain continuity when the leaders are changing all the time, one of the parents' comments.

### *Why is parental interest in being elected to school boards so low?*

Communication is poor between 'contact parents' and parents who are not on the board, according to the principal.

*The board is a catastrophe! Just now we have no board. We have written to all the parents and now we have got parents on the board but no deputies. Maybe we will have to have a new election in a year's time to bring the board up to full strength. (Principal)*

The principal thinks that there are two types of parents who are on the board: One who believe in the school and sees its possibilities for their children and the other type who think that the school is so bad that they want to change it.

*I have the power – I decide what will happen. The power lies with me and that means that parents who are suspicious I can not achieve good relations with, but parents who are interested in development and support I will work with them in a creative way. (Principal)*

There is very little interest in getting elected to the board and the two parents interviewed are worried about that. They indicate that one way to increase interest is to support the 'contact parents' in their work. A contact parent is one parent in each school class who is responsible for channelling information between the board and all the parents in the school class. One of the parents interviewed thinks that the parents are not clear that they can in fact improve or change the activity in the school. The two parents think that one explanation for the lack of interest might be that the work on the board takes a lot of time.

*Why do teachers react negatively to questions about school boards?*

The two parents do not think that teachers are interested in the school boards.

*I think that teachers do not want to be involved. They are afraid of parents being actively involved in their own working area. I can understand that, it can be difficult to understand and deal with situations when parents call in to question things to do with the school. She finishes... We must have respect for each other and we need to keep a balance all the time between us. (Parent 1)*

The informant teacher is not critical of this board and means that the work on the board has been positive and constructive with no conflicts between parents and teachers.

*How are the various interests of teachers, pupils, parents and politicians balanced in the actual partnership?*

*This board works democratically. We have meetings every month and talk about the school. The teachers have to explain what they do, how they will teach and why they have chosen that particular method. The dialogue about this influences school activity. (Principal)*

The principal indicates that the board works with different aspects in the school. She sees the board as a sparring partner and means that teachers make the education work. The reality is that the principal and the teachers together have the power on the board despite, the parents' majority. But we need to collaborate, she adds.

The teachers keep a low profile during the board meetings. The two parent informants said that before they had had the feeling that the teachers and the parents were working against each other, but that this had now changed. There had been trouble earlier but today the two parents are very satisfied with the positive work done by the board. The pupils sit on the board for one year but there are some difficulties. Parents, teachers and the principal want things to work better with the pupils and suggest a teacher be appointed to help them on the board. All board members talk about the lack of support and feedback from the municipality authorities. The principal maintains that there is a good dialogue at the board meetings, but from the perspective of democracy she admits it is not working satisfactorily. By that she means that the board does not have regular meetings with the central authority in the municipality.

*Bridge School board members*

The principle addresses the democratic function of the board and emphasizes the good relations and functional dialogue the board has with the municipal executive board. The chairman has held his position on the board for four years and has now been re-elected for a further four-year period. The board has also good relations with the professionals. The chairman has both formal and informal meetings with other boards in the municipality and the board communicates with other parents in the school via 'contact parents'. In this municipality all the boards are important partners. There is a common interest at all levels in the municipality and among the parents, according to the director at the Child and Culture Administration. There is a school council where the chairs of all boards meet every month to discuss questions of interest for all school activity in the municipality. The director emphasizes the importance of school boards, now even more than earlier. This is linked to the wider pressure on the compulsory school, he believes.

*Why is parental interest in being elected to school boards so low?*

An interest in being elected to the board has not been overwhelming. The parents received information about the board election through the school's homepage, a parents' meeting and 'contact parents'.

All the parents have also received a paper with information about the election via the Parents Association and the Department of Education. In spite of such comprehensive information, very few parents came to the election meeting. This board was fortunate however, to be full, as many of the members were re-elected. Today there is a new procedure for election, parents can announce their interest candidature via a letter or electronically and do not have to be physically present at the election meeting.

In 2006 five parents were re-elected for a new period. The parents worry that there are no immigrant parents on the board and they believe that this is a barrier that must be overcome. The board takes up too much time, one of the parent comments and that can be one reason about the lack of interest among parents. The principal thinks that communication between the 'contact parents' and the other parents has to be improved. The chairman has the same opinion and he also wants to see the role of 'contact parent' clarified. One of the teachers thinks that the reason for the lack of interest among parents derives from their belief that they do not have any influence or that the school knows best.

*There was actually more interest in the school council's work during the 1970s. At that time being on the council was a kind of springboard to the municipal board. (Informant from the Teachers' Association)*

*Why do teachers react negatively to questions about school boards?*

The teachers have not been positive to the implementation of school boards, as they see them usurping their influence over the activities in their school. The implementation of school boards was an important indication of the government's intention to move power away from the teachers. Earlier the teachers had a voice in all questions and a great deal of influence. When school boards were implemented the teacher councils were replaced by pedagogical councils and now the school boards can decide when they want to have comments submitted. This is the core of teachers' opposition. The Teachers' Association and teachers in general have been positive towards this shift, but they are against giving such power to school boards. One of the arguments is the difficulties in reaching equality between schools, the informant from Teachers Association mean. The board does not have any influence one of the teachers on the board says. She is hesitant about the board.

*You can say that parents are handicapped. They do not know how the school operates, in fact they do not have the same competence as we teachers. And they do not have the same information and the same experience of how things work. And that means they must listen to what the teachers and the principal say because they are the ones who have the knowledge. (Teacher 1)*

*How are the various interests of teachers, pupils, parents and politicians balanced in the actual partnership?*

The principal calls attention to the fact that parents are in the majority. He is satisfied with the dialogue on the board and positive to the politician contacts. The pupils on the board are given their questions by the pupils' councils. Citizens can improve their knowledge by contacting the politicians or the school. The principal emphasizes that it is important to increase the interest of citizens in the school by inviting them to visit the school and by encouraging the school to make visits to the society.

*It is important to have a properly functioning collaboration between the board and the principal for the development of the school. The collaboration between us provides legitimacy, both above and below in the system. (Principal)*

The board's most important role is to be a link between the principal and the parents according to the chairman of the board. He believes that it may be necessary to use this influence in both directions. The example he gives is when the board was able to stop budget plans for the school. But he also says that sometimes parents have to make a decision they do not like but which maybe necessary.

The board has a democratic function, says the teacher. There are regular meetings between the chairman of the board and the politicians. One of the parents indicates that teacher activity on the board is low compared to that of parents. The role of pupils on the board is difficult. Both teachers and parents agree that. The pupils need to have more information about the work on the board, according to one of the parents. The informant from the Parents Association means that the pupils have in general little influence on the board.

There has to be a connection between the pupils' councils and teachers to improve this. She also thinks that the variety of partners on the board makes the work complex and that collaboration among them must be changed for the better.

### Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this article was to show the paradox of parental influence in the Danish schools. The expectation was that by implementing school boards parental influence would increase in the school. The politicians' argument was that through extended decentralisation parents would become a part of the decision making related to the activities in their own school. The boards would also function as a link to the parents. Interesting school questions, school development, finances and employment were some of the issues which the politicians thought would motivate parents to find solutions and to actively participate in.

Two case studies have exemplified Danish school boards. In this discussion I want to link to some Swedish points and the four questions which I introduced at the start: *Why is parental interest in being elected to school boards so low?* The informants emphasize the importance of communication. There is a need of better communication between the 'contact parents' in each school class and the board and to the parents in general. The role of 'contact parents' must be strengthened. Communication is a problem, although there has been a lot of input to improve it. It takes time to be a board member and parents seem not to have this time as this study also indicates. The board often deals with questions connected to the school's finances and board members are expected to assume responsibility for a reduced school budget, which some parents see as an untenable situation. Parents indicate that the municipality, which overlooks all the schools in the municipality, should take greater responsibility.

The second question was: *Why do teachers react negatively about school boards?* There are some possible explanations to this. When school boards were implemented the school councils were disbanded. In those school councils the teacher council was a consulting authority which was to be heard in every question. The teacher council was replaced by a pedagogical council which could be heard at the discretion of the boards. This meant a reduction in the influence of the teachers, and they were disappointed. Teachers are of opinion that school boards do not have any influence. Parents think that teachers are afraid of the parents getting involved in school activities.

The third question: *How are the various interests of teachers, pupils, parents and politicians balanced in the actual partnership?* The principal at Lake School believes that teachers, pupils, parents and politicians all have an interest in the school. The principals at the two schools commented that the parents lacked interest in being engaged in the board's work. Bridge School shows that collaboration between the other school boards and the municipality is functioning very well but at Lake School this collaboration does not function at all. The parents indicate that dialogue and regular feedback between the municipality and the boards are necessary if the work on the boards is to be meaningful. Teachers keep a low profile in the two Danish boards. Those who are most active are the parents. The pupils' participation on the boards is difficult. One of the principals indicates that pupils become hostages and they should not be on the board. The difficulties are that pupils are elected for one year and the questions are often too difficult for the pupils to comprehend. Another factor is that pupils are not used to this form of meetings. My study shows that there are no balanced partnerships in the two Danish cases. This is a determining factor for weakness.

The fourth and final question is: *What impact do neo-liberalism and marketplace policies have on the participation of parents in schools?* In many countries there is a clear consequence of neo-liberalism and market influence in form of policies, which have given parents a stronger position in partnership with schools. Partnerships mean mutuality, and a shared responsibility among all the actors involved. I argue that the politicians' aims regarding these boards are not clear, as Lake School shows in this study. There is no feedback between the boards at municipality level. In fact this is true for all 25 boards in the whole municipality. The politicians have no interest in this feedback or in visiting the school boards. However parents in Lake School have been successful in blocking the proposed extensive financial cuts and changes in the plans to extend the school.

The situation in Sweden is similar regarding the parental interest in participating in school boards. Looking at teachers' opinion it seems that they are not dissatisfied with the boards in the same way as the Danish teachers are. This may be explained by the fact that in most of the Swedish cases it is the parents or principals who have taken the initiative to introduce the board.

Swedish board members felt that they participated more in the activities in the school and that there was strong collaboration between the various partners. But a study from 2002 shows that many parents not on the board felt

excluded (Kristoffersson, 2002). The pupils have also difficulties in the Swedish boards. There is also a little interest on the part of politicians and the municipal authority in providing support, feedback and visiting the boards. My earlier study shows that this is an area which is ignored in many ways and in which board members are disappointed. Compared with Denmark with the strong historical influence by Grundtvig on Youth School, Sweden has not been influenced in the same way. My conclusion is that the question about parental influence in Sweden can not be seen in the same way as in Denmark.

The Danish school boards must be seen in a wider context, where an increased influence from international politics and global trends can be found. Earlier studies in Denmark and other countries with school boards show a low level of interest on the part of parents (Farrell & Jones, 2000; Howell, 2005; Sørensen, 1999) and the findings are the same in Sweden (Kristoffersson,

2002, 2005). The result indicates that parents are not so interested in school development that they want to work voluntarily with it. Hence, school boards in Denmark have not cooperated to strengthen and increase parental influence. The change in the governance of schools implies instead less interest from parents in being involved in the school collective. Parents are instead more interested in their own child's school achievement and choices regarding education and career. One explanation for the lack of interest in school boards maybe that their implementation was political. Other negative factors are that the politicians lack a clear purpose for the school boards and that their collaboration with the boards is minimal. Grundtvig's intention was that parents should have rights in the education of their children. Therefore, the paradox of parental influence in Danish schools is that parental influence becomes less just when politicians have tried to strengthen it by law.

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