

**Background report for the Norwegian Quality Development Committee
[Kvalitetsutviklingsutvalget]**

**Quality Assurance in the Danish Public Education System
and Transitions to General and Vocational Upper Secondary Education**



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Final Version

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I. Introduction

In the early 2020s, the Nordic welfare states are at a watershed concerning their education systems, because education is increasingly torn between different tasks, priorities, and stakeholder interests. Some of the drivers of this situation is that education takes place in the intersections between local, national, and global developments, presenting a challenge for the coherence and sustainability of Nordic comprehensive education systems (Wallenius et al., 2018; Wiborg, 2013).

At the global level, ongoing humanitarian, health, and climate crises, the spread of lies and disinformation over social media, the rise of new nationalisms, ongoing geopolitical shifts, and the constant reshuffling of roles between the public and private sectors are a source of considerable uncertainty and put tremendous strain on education. These developments carry implications at the national and local levels, and, consequently, education is a contested site, with divergent views on how it is supposed to prepare young people for an uncertain future.

The Nordic universal welfare state model is internationally known as an essentially taxpayer-financed system that seeks to distribute equal rights and opportunities among the entire population, such as by providing education free of charge, from preschool to higher education programmes (Telhaug, Mediås, & Aasen, 2006). Historically, Nordic education systems have been closely interwoven with nation-states as the site where the most appropriate citizenship mentality to support these nation-states is produced (Helsvig, 2022; Jørgensen, 2015; Lieberkind, 2015; Telhaug, Mediås & Aasen, 2004). Apart from social equality and equal opportunity, this is the core idea behind the notion of the comprehensive public school established in all the Nordic states (Buchardt, Markkola, & Valtonen, 2013; Ydesen & Buchardt, 2020).

Given these initial observations, some recurring and current challenges for the education systems of the Nordic welfare state model are the following:

- The balance between centralisation and decentralisation in terms of accountability mechanisms (often manifested in debates about local latitude and professional freedom versus centralised control, surveillance, and key performance indicators).
- The balance between equality and student differentiation in terms of education access and provision (individual versus collective priorities, in general, and how to achieve inclusive education, in particular).
- Increased social polarisation as manifested in shifting balances between the public comprehensive school and the civil/private sector consisting of free schools and private schools respectively.
- How to secure coherence and meaningful paths through the education system in a way that will ensure positive destinations for all students while meeting the needs of society and the labour market as a whole.

- How to ensure student well-being and individual recognition in schooling activities while ensuring and documenting academic progress at the student, school, municipal, and national levels.
- How to critically weigh and balance the agendas, interests, and priorities of the 360-degree stakeholders associated with the education system, for example, students, parents, teachers, school leaders, local authorities, national authorities, edu-businesses, ed-tech businesses, private foundations, and global actors such as international organisations – the European Union (EU), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in particular.

Finding good solutions to these challenges is a core concern of governments, politicians, and decision makers, as well as practitioners associated with the education system. Normally, it would be the task of education research to set things straight and clarify the situation in terms of knowledge, including the limitations and explanatory power associated with different types of knowledge (Grundmann, 2017). The role ascribed to education research by governments, politicians, decision makers, and practitioners is often that of providing knowledge, data, and evidence that can be used to gain orientation, legitimation, and traction for policies and schooling practices (Cairney, 2016). However, education research is itself a fragmented field because of differing research ideals and approaches, as well as diverse institutional contexts, ranging from universities, international organisations, think tanks, sector research institutions, and consultancy firms to edu-businesses with their own research departments (Rasmussen, 2022). The implication is that what is labelled education research is a slippery concept and closely entangled with some of the same agendas, interests, priorities, and technologies as those of other stakeholders in education (Brown, 2015; Karseth, Sivesind, & Steiner-Khamsi, 2021; Popkewitz, 2020).

Given these initial observations about the status and challenges of education at the global level in general and the Nordic universal education model in particular, it is very commendable that the Norwegian Quality Development Committee [*Kvalitetsutviklingsutvalget*] goes to great lengths to acquire broad, balanced, and qualified input, knowledge, and insights to inform its work on the development and design of a new quality assurance system for the Norwegian public school system.

The purpose of this report is to contribute to this work by offering insights and findings from the Danish context. As a member of the same family of Nordic comprehensive education systems as Norway, the Danish public school system is a core pillar of the universal welfare state model, providing free education, from nursery school to university. The Municipal primary and lower secondary school, called the *Folkeskole*, offers comprehensive education to students from age six, in year 0 (reception class), through year 9 or 10 (year 10 being optional). Much like in Norway, it is essentially a decentralised system in which the municipalities are responsible for the financial and administrative management of schools.

The components of this report underpinning its purpose consist of 1) a factual presentation of the quality assurance system in the Danish *Folkeskole* and higher education, as well as the transition paths to general and vocational upper secondary education; 2) a historically informed and contextual analysis of the recent background and development of the Danish quality assurance system in the *Folkeskole*; 3) a presentation of the key findings from the state-of-the-art research literature in terms of the quality assurance and transition mechanisms in Danish education; and 4) a summary of the key findings. Thus, the report is structured in four chapters reflecting this fourfold purpose.

II. Methodology behind the four chapters

Chapter 1 is a factual and descriptive presentation of the quality assurance system in the Danish *Folkeskole* and higher education, as well as the transition paths to general and vocational upper secondary education. The data underpinning this chapter are from official policy documents in the form of green papers and white papers from the government and Ministry of Education. These data are available at the website of the Danish Ministry of Education¹.

Chapter 2 is the core pillar of the report. It is based on four data sources that allow the identification of different historical events and trajectories, stakeholder positions, and the problematisations and solutions associated with these stakeholders. Some of these data sources, listed as follows, were harvested in connection with the research project Education Access under the Reign of Testing and Inclusion running between 2018 and 2023,² while others were collected for the purpose of writing this report:

- 1) Research literature and media articles about the national tests and the development of the new assessment system.
- 2) Interviews at three schools in two different municipalities, with three teachers from each school, three school leaders, four civil servants from each of the municipalities, and two ministerial civil servants, conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic in the summer and autumn of 2020. In addition, the report draws on an interview from September 2021 with a high-level politician participating in the negotiations on the new assessment system. The interviews were conducted according to interview guides tailored to the different target groups and individuals. All interviews were conducted in the interviewee's mother tongue and transcribed verbatim in the original language. Key passages from all transcripts have been made available in English. All interviewees

¹ <https://www.uvm.dk>

² See [EduAccess.aau.dk](https://eduaccess.aau.dk). The project is funded by the Independent Research Fund Denmark, with the author as principal investigator.

have been anonymised and all the data stored following General Data Protection Regulation guidelines. All translations from Danish into English are by the author, unless stated otherwise.

3) A radio news programme from the Danish Broadcasting Corporation [*Danmarks Radio (DR)*] about the national tests aired on 2 February 2021, containing interviews and debates with key stakeholders

4) A search of literature since 2010 conducted in the following Nordic and Danish education journals:

- Nordic Studies in Education
- Scandinavian Journal of Education Research
- Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy
- Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education
- Dansk pædagogisk Tidsskrift
- Cepra-Striben
- Kvan

In addition, the following databases have been searched:

- Education Resources Information Center (eric.ed.gov)
- bibliotek.dk
- JSTOR (jstor.org)
- Taylor & Francis Online (tandfonline.com)
- Wiley Online Library (onlinelibrary.wiley.com)
- Springer (link.springer.com)

The following English search words have been used in the education journals: *quality assurance + Denmark, accountability + Denmark, education, transition + Denmark, education + entry requirement + Denmark, education + grades + Denmark, education + policy + Denmark, and education+ testing + Denmark.*

The same searches have been made in the Danish translations, for example, *kvalitetssikring + Danmark.*

Chapter 3 aims to complement chapter 2 by adding important – and more general - state-of-the-art research about quality assurance in education and transitions into general and vocational upper secondary education. The chapter is based on the systematic literature search mentioned under ‘chapter 2’ above.

Chapter 4 is an analytical summary of the findings in Chapters 1, 2, and 3 and thus does not have an independent methodology.

III. Chapter 1: The Danish quality assurance system and education transitions

The purpose of this chapter is to first provide a brief factual description of the present Danish quality assurance system – both for the *Folkeskole* and higher education – and the system of transitions to general and vocational upper secondary education.

III.a. The quality assurance system for the Folkeskole

The current quality assurance system for the *Folkeskole* is described in a 2011 report by the Agency for the Quality Development of Public Schools [*Styrelsen for Evaluering og Kvalitetsudvikling af Grundskolen*] under the Ministry of Children and Education. The report specifies how quality assurance, evaluation, and accountability in the public school system rest on the following four pillars (Skedsmo, Rönnerberg et al., 2021):

- The school-leaving examination after year 9 (instituted in 1964, mandatory since 2006)
- The national tests (instituted in 2006 and launched in 2010)
- Individual student plans³ and municipal quality reports (instituted in 2006)
- User satisfaction and student wellbeing surveys (launched in 2010/2020)

Except for the individual student plans, all the data from these four pillars are made publicly available, although the authorities have refrained from producing league tables.⁴ In the practice of schooling, these four pillars are intertwined with more locally driven classroom assessments organised by schools and teachers, often with a pedagogical purpose. They can consist of formal tests measuring progress in different areas of the curriculum, and from year 8 onwards teachers give marks for assignments and two annual marks for general proficiency.

The most important components of the current Danish educational quality assurance system are the national tests, the individual student plans, and the municipal quality reports, the national tests having undoubtedly been the most controversial. With their advanced adaptive information technology–based design that promised to accurately test every student while linking teaching to national curriculum standards, the national tests constituted the centre of gravity of the Danish education quality assurance system (Kousholt, 2016). Officially, the current national tests serve the purpose of providing teachers formative assessment data about the individual students. Linked to a national curriculum, students in years 2 to 8 are

³ Individual student plans are compulsory for each student every year in all subjects (Moos & Kofod, 2011). Apart from subject content and pedagogical progress, the student plans ideally serve a formative purpose aimed at individualising education while at the same time holding students and parents accountable in parent–teacher meetings. In this sense, the student plans serve both formative pedagogical purposes and assessment accountability purposes.

⁴ It should be noted that the private right-wing libertarian think tank Centre for Political Studies publishes annual league tables of schools in Denmark using publicly available data.

tested in one to four different subjects each year, except for year 5. The subjects tested through these years are literacy, maths, English, geography, biology, physics/chemistry, and Danish for second language speakers (McNess et al., 2015). However, the current national tests have also been explicitly used for accountability purposes, since the results are featured in publicly available municipal quality reports and are used for monitoring purposes by the Ministry of Education (Andreasen & Ydesen, 2014).

The municipal quality reports are mandatory annual statistical reports designed to be a governance instrument for municipalities and the national authorities instituted in 2006. Moos (2014) describes the instrument as follows,

The Ministry of Education sets the goals of education and provides a broad template for the quality reports. The municipal level is allowed to modify the quality-report template and education aims to align with local policies. Schools are responsible for writing the report and may include information on staff use of sick leave, allocations for teachers, staff salaries, etc. In addition, schools may formulate their one- to three-year goals that align with issues selected either by the district administrators or by the school leaders and teachers. The school is expected to conduct an annual self-evaluation and use its outcomes to formulate aims for the following year. The mixture of fixed issues and school issues included in the quality report is at the discretion of schools, as are choices pertaining to self-evaluation procedures (p. 438f.).

As of 2020, the Ministry for Education stated that the reports must contain an outline of the number of students taking the year 9 school-leaving examination, grade levels and averages in all subjects of the school-leaving examination, grade averages in relation to socio-economic status, number of students with the grade 2 or above in Danish and Math, national test results, transitions to general and vocational upper secondary education (including education status 3, 9, and 15 months after students have graduated from the *Folkeskole* and the number of students expected to complete a general or vocational upper secondary education within 6 years of leaving the *Folkeskole*), and the results of the mandatory wellbeing survey.⁵ School boards are tasked with commenting on the reports for their respective schools.

III.b. The quality assurance system for higher education

The quality assurance system of higher education in Denmark is described in a recent ministerial publication (Danish Ministry of Higher Education and Science, 2021).⁶ The following elements are emphasised (p. 22):

⁵ See: <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/Ita/2020/204>

⁶ See <https://ufm.dk/en/publications/2022/the-danish-education-system>.

1. Common rules and guidelines (curricula) specifying the aims, content, and duration of programmes and individual subjects
2. A testing and examination system using national boards of external examiners
3. Ministerial approval of the provision of education and various degrees of monitoring in the different educational areas
4. Accreditation of higher education institutions by the Danish Accreditation Institution

In 1999 and 2000, the Bologna Declaration and the Lisbon Agenda ushered in a decade of extensive educational harmonisation designed to change the entire architecture and organisation of European higher education systems. In this sense, Denmark is a participant in the European Higher Education Area and, as such, has implemented the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance. The implication is that

All public higher education study programmes must meet these international standards of quality and relevance. For all institutions of higher education, accreditation is mandatory and a precondition for qualifying for public funding based on the 2013 Act on the Accreditation of Institutions of Higher Education. The Danish Qualifications Framework has been incorporated into the quality criteria of the accreditation system (Danish Ministry of Higher Education and Science, 2021, p. 22).

Part of the quality assurance process in higher education involves different types of cross-sectoral evaluations conducted by the sector research institution the Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA).⁷

III.c. Paths of transition to general and vocational upper secondary education

All students who have received relevant instruction and passed the prescribed examinations of the *Folkeskole* can generally continue to the general and vocational upper secondary education of their choice. Four main streams are available to students: upper secondary education [*Gymnasium – studentereksamen (STX)*], business education [*handelsskolen – højere handelseksamen (HHX)*], technical education [*Teknisk Gymnasium – højere teknisk eksamen (HTX)*], and vocational training [*erhvervsuddannelser*]. The transition to general and vocational upper secondary education is largely based on grades and teachers' evaluations of the students' readiness for further education.

Assessing students' readiness to choose and complete a secondary education programme is a process that starts in year 8. The assessment must ensure that students who are not ready for

⁷ EVA is an independent state institution established under the Ministry of Education in 1999 and one of the central research institutions working in education policy. EVA (2019) evaluates and conducts research within the education field at the request of other branches (ministries, local authorities, etc.), as well as under their own initiative.

education are supported by continuing school and guidance efforts towards the end of year 9 or 10.

Admission to further education streams is contingent on the student meeting a number of formal requirements. These requirements include, but are not limited to, having completed the *Folkeskole* with a certain minimum grade point average, as well as an individual assessment certifying the student's preparedness to continue in an upper secondary education programme.

If the requirements are not met, the student can apply for admission based on an individual assessment. In this case, the head of the receiving school decides whether the student may be admitted. To make the decision, the head of the school may require the student to take an admission test in one or more subjects. For all programmes, an admission test is required if one or more of the compulsory exams have not been passed (Danish Ministry of Higher Education and Science 2021, p. 8).

For all students in the *Folkeskole*, free schools, and private schools, the school undertakes an education readiness assessment [*uddannelsesparathedsvurdering*]. An initial assessment is made in year 8, followed up by assessments in the years 9 and 10. Schools then report to the local authorities, where the youth guidance office issues a final assessment to the parents.

The school must assess the student's academic, personal, and social skills for starting and completing youth education. All three criteria must be met for the student to be considered *ready for education*. Practical skills were recently added to the criteria to strengthen the position and relevance of the vocational education stream. The level of practical skills can be assessed as medium or high, but they cannot negatively affect the overall educational readiness assessment.

In year 8, students are assessed as *education ready* when they have an average grade of at least 4 in all graded subjects given in the *Folkeskole*.⁸ However, the average grade requirement is 5 if the student applies for the *Gymnasium*.

In years 9 and 10, the vocational stream requires a grade average of 2.0 in the subjects of Danish and maths. For the *Gymnasium*, the required average is 5.0.

In terms of personal skills, students are assessed by the relevant teacher team in five focus areas: independence, motivation, responsibility, stability, and readiness to make choices [*valgparathed*]. Social skills are assessed in terms of collaborative skills, respect, and tolerance.

Prior to October 2022, students could be labelled as *not education ready*. This label was found to be inappropriately stigmatising and it has now been replaced with the label *ready for*

⁸ The current grading system in Denmark was implemented in 2006. It consists of a seven-point scale with the following marks: -3, 00, 02, 4, 7, 10, and 12.

education activities other than the Gymnasium and the vocational stream based on the idea that all students are ready for some kind of activity after the Folkeskole.

IV. Chapter 2: Developing a new quality assurance system for the *Folkeskole*

This chapter aims to present an analysis of the background and fundamental agendas, issues, and problems associated with the ongoing establishment of a new quality assurance, accountability, and assessment system in Denmark. Key points of orientation in the analysis are the positions and agendas of the 360-degree stakeholders of the *Folkeskole* through the most recent political reforms and ongoing committee work, namely, the national and local authorities, school leaders, teachers, parents, and students.

IV.a. The current situation

The Danish *Folkeskole* is currently in the process of considerable changes in terms of quality assurance, accountability, and assessment. On 29 October 2021, a broad political agreement supported by seven political parties in Parliament concerning a new educational evaluation and assessment system for Denmark was presented by the Minister for Children and Education, Pernille Rosenkrantz-Theil. The system was met with widespread satisfaction by all key stakeholders in education, who had formed the Together for School [*Sammen om Skolen*] initiative in May 2021.⁹ The core component of the new system is the introduction of the *Folkeskole's* National Proficiency Test, to be launched in the school year 2026/27, replacing the current national tests from 2010. The key changes in the new assessment system are increases in the number of mandatory tests, from 11 to 14, and the number of voluntary tests, from four to 11; abandonment of the adaptive test design, replacing it with a linear one; moving the test period from the end of the academic year to the start of it; a sole focus on reading and maths skills; the replacement of student plans with a parent–teacher communication book; the replacement of municipal quality reports with annual school development conversations; abolition of the student label *not education ready*; early and systematic screening for dyslexia and giftedness; and stronger monitoring of schools of unsatisfactory quality (Ministry for Children and Education, 2021).

⁹ The Together for School initiative was launched in May 2021 and consists of the government and the leading interest organisations engaged in the public school system, namely, the Teachers' Union [*Danmarks Lærerforening*]; the School Leader Association [*Skolelederforeningen*]; the Association of Municipalities (or Local Government Denmark) [*Kommunernes Landsforening*]; the Danish Federation of Early Childhood Teachers and Youth Educators (BUPL) [*Børne- og Ungepædagogers Landsforening*]; Danish School Students [*Danske Skoleelever*], School and Parents [*Skole og Forældre*]; and the Association for Public Administrators for Children and Culture [*Børne- og Kulturchefforeningen*], see: <https://www.035.dk/media/14444796/endelig-kronik-sammen-om-skolen.pdf>

The bill instituting the new assessment system was passed on 9 June 2022, but the specifics of how these considerable changes will be concretely implemented remains to be seen, and a four-year process involving the Together for School initiative has begun in which partners can present ideas and suggestions that will be discussed among the participating political parties.

IV.b. Background and context

Denmark's participation in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement in 1991 was a watershed moment in Danish education policy. A report of the results of Danish pupils was published under the title 'The Ugly Duckling and the Swans', where the ugly duckling referred to Denmark and the swans to the other Nordic countries (Mejding, 1994). This report caused immense debate, and Danish education policies have since looked increasingly intensively at transnational policy trends for inspiration (Gustafsson, 2012). Much education policy research argues that the *Folkeskole*, from the 1990s onwards, has been subject to considerable neoliberal reforms celebrating market-oriented policies of free school choice and taximeter financing¹⁰ (Dovemark et al., 2018).

In a 2004 review of the Danish education system led by the British professor Peter Mortimore, the OECD called explicitly for an evaluation culture and hailed it as 'the single change that is most important to achieve if other initiatives are to be introduced so that they take effect and standards can be raised' (Ekholm, 2004, p. 129; see also Rambøll, 2011). Following the review, the then centre-right coalition government made the examination for year 9 leavers (age 16) mandatory and introduced national tests at various stages of compulsory education (Hanssen, 2016; Sørensen, 2011). The Reform Programme 2008 followed, which required municipalities to implement a quality assurance framework and publish annual reports about school progress based on various indicators (Milner, Mattei & Ydesen, 2021). These developments signal a movement towards stronger accountability mechanisms, in line with what Verger et al. (2019) termed 'school autonomy with accountability reforms', that is, the rollout of increasing top-down authority while granting lower echelons boundaries of autonomy within which they could be held accountable.

However, the national tests were torn between unaligned purposes right from the start (Rasmussen & Miller, 2021). My interview with a civil servant in the Ministry of Education emphasised how "the relation between governance purposes and pedagogical purposes of

¹⁰ The central government's system of financing education and training is mainly based on the so-called taximeter system, a comprehensive financing system based on per capita grants (cash per student) to educational institutions. The grants are calculated primarily according to the number of registered students who pass an examination. The taximeter rate varies depending on the field of study and level of education (Danish Ministry of Higher Education and Science, 2022, p. 19).

the national tests certainly constitutes a tension”.¹¹ This tension between the purposes of assessment is also explicit in my interviews with municipal officials and teachers. As a general observation, it is mostly the local and national authorities who tend to find aggregate data very useful, highlighting the governance purpose of assessment and, in this case, the Danish national tests:

We said, ‘Well, as a big school system, we need data’. We cannot just look out of the window and say, ‘How do you feel today?’ So, even though many teachers feel that, ‘Oh, you know, this is control and we don’t like that, and why don’t you see me as professional?’ and such kinds of things, we said, ‘Well why don’t you see it upside down? Why don’t you see it as we can actually qualify both you, the whole school system, and then collect data?’¹²

On the other hand – and perhaps unsurprisingly – the pedagogical purposes of assessment are most emphasised among the teachers:

The system wants to fit a child into a box where she or he does not fit. And the test only brings them down, because they are not able to achieve good results. So, if I go in to educate based on success, make them happy, and then, once a year, I have to make them take this test, and they see, ‘I am not worth anything, I cannot do anything’ ... and it is difficult for them to even sit for an hour, an hour and a half... I think it is abusive to these children, and I am forced to do that.¹³

In this sense, the purposes of assessment constitute one field of tension in Danish educational assessment policies.

A second site of tension in the Danish education system revolves around the issue of centralisation/decentralisation in education governance. As we have seen, the education system is essentially a decentralised system in which the municipalities are responsible for the supervision and monitoring of schools. However, over the last 20 years, the system has witnessed the increasing incursion of state-level policy instruments (Skedsmo, Rönnerberg & Ydesen, 2021). As reflected in my interview with a ministerial official, tension has arisen between local and national authorities:

Overall, assessment and testing are a field of tension in Denmark.... We have some centrally defined assessment tools, including the national tests, pupil plans, but there is also great flexibility in terms of assessment in the public school system, which falls under local jurisdiction.... An example is that we have the national tests at select grade levels and in select subjects, but there is also extensive use of

¹¹ Interview with a ministerial official on 5 November 2020, conducted by the author.

¹² Interview with a municipal career counsellor on 20 September 2020, conducted by the author.

¹³ Interview with a teacher on 20 June 2020, conducted by the author.

locally decided tests, which the schools buy and that can be decided on various levels.... Often it is at the level of a teacher team, where they chose the teaching materials and tests found to be most meaningful in relation to the students and the classes.¹⁴

Since 2007, the Ministry of Education (2018) has worked to install a unified system of accountability based on so-called data-based risk assessment indicators associated with the four pillars mentioned above. This system is designed to make it easier for the ministry to identify at-risk schools and municipal authorities, which can ultimately be placed under its administration.

The national tests play a pivotal role in this respect. Viewed as a policy instrument, however, the national tests embody several problems, all with significant implications for education governance. The national tests were officially introduced as a formative assessment dedicated to the monitoring of individual students' academic progress, serving as a key point of orientation at parent–teacher meetings. However, gradually the tests came to play a broader role in the accountability system, calling into question their initial framing as low-stakes formative measures (Schou et al, 2016). There is ample evidence that students, teachers, and school leaders consider these tests high stakes, which impacts negatively on their practices (Kousholt & Hamre, 2016; McNess et al., 2015; Skedsmo, Rönnerberg & Ydesen, 2021). The reason is that data from the national tests are being used for other purposes – such as the monitoring of teachers and schools and resource allocation – than originally intended.

IV.c. The process behind a new quality assurance system for the Folkeskole

The presentation of the general outline of the new educational assessment system in October 2021 was the result of a process begun some 28 months earlier. A key point of orientation leading up to the political process was an evaluation report published in March 2019, jointly written by professor of didactics Jeppe Bundsgaard and professor of statistics Svend Kreiner (2019). The report found the national tests to be fundamentally flawed and inaccurate in both design and implementation, and it recommended that the tests be terminated as soon as possible. In the heated debate that followed, it became apparent that the inaccuracies of the national tests had already been communicated to Parliament at a hearing in 2016, but no one had acted on them (Skedsmo, Rönnerberg & Ydesen, 2021).

In June 2019, the newly elected Social Democratic government in Denmark responded to the criticism of the national tests and announced their suspension in the school year 2019/20, making them optional, although the tests remained compulsory for the lowest-performing schools. The suspension of the national tests had long been a strong wish among the left-wing

¹⁴ Interview with a ministerial official on 5 November 2020, conducted by the author.

parties supporting the government. However, the centre-left bloc, led by the government, went one step further and launched the redesign of the entire educational evaluation and assessment system in Denmark.

In September 2019, Rosenkrantz-Theil remarkably stated, ‘We want to abolish the national tests and replace them with a new system. Comprehensive work must be undertaken to find the right tools. The goal is that more children should do well in school’ (Mainz & Fuglsang, 2019). The minister also emphasised how the new assessment system, ‘to a lesser extent ... should be a test-based system’. Knowing that the suspension and subsequent redesign of the assessment system would be met with concerns about monitoring and accountability from both local and national school authorities, as well as concerns about interruptions in data flow from parts of the research community, the minister added,

As for the research part, we can obtain random samples. If the tests primarily must provide politicians and researchers with information about how things are going, then one need not attend many courses in statistics to understand that we need not test all the students in the country to obtain a picture. (Mainz & Fuglsang, 2019)

In February 2020, broad political agreement promised the introduction of a new assessment system within three to five years, opening a window for reflection on what assessment methods could be used and how they could be implemented. It was the result of this agreement that was announced in October 2021. In March 2020, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Denmark went into lockdown, which also involved the immediate physical closure of all educational institutions. With the national tests already suspended, teachers played a leading role in assessing and providing feedback to students, and criticism of the national tests increased among school leaders and teachers, often drawing on the Bundsgaard–Kreiner report. The words of school leader Thomas Dandanell echo this criticism in May 2020:

We have given personal feedback to thousands of children over the last 10 years who have been wrongly informed of their academic level... it is children’s lives, self-esteem and self-understanding that have been at stake. It is catastrophic. For many families, national tests have been an authority in knowing the level of the class and the individual pupil. I have made many decisions about classes, individual pupils, and the distribution of resources based on, among other things, the national tests. The bottom line is they cannot be trusted, and if we had not used all sorts of other data too, I would definitely have made erroneous decisions. (Plesner, 2020, p. 50)

However, in February 2021, the Ministry of Education surprisingly announced the reintroduction of mandatory national testing for all *Folkeskole* students upon their return from lockdown. Although the government recognised the conclusions from the Bundsgaard–Kreiner report about the national tests being inaccurate at the individual level, it argued that

there was a need for aggregate knowledge about an alleged ‘learning loss’ during the pandemic (Joel, 2021). Teachers expressed grave concerns about this priority, arguing that a focus on student well-being should take priority in the wake of the lockdown.

IV.d. Debates around educational assessment in the wake of the pandemic

Following the political decision to reinstate the national tests upon the children’s return to school after the lockdown, an increasing number of municipalities applied to the Ministry of Education to be exempt from them in 2021. However, their request was rejected by the ministry.¹⁵ The argument put forth by local authorities and many teachers was that testing was the wrong priority, compared to the urgent need to focus on children’s well-being, which had suffered a blow during lockdown. Thomas Medom of the Socialist People’s Party and chair of the Children and Youth Committee in Aarhus, the second largest city in Denmark, launched a profound critique of the government’s decision. Medom argued that there is no point in conducting the national tests, because they have proven to be inaccurate and are useless to students, teachers, and parents. Medom (2021) also called the reinstatement of the tests a scandal, given that the national test results had been the cornerstone of parent–teacher conversations for tens of thousands of students over the years, when, in fact, the results had only been for the benefit of the ministry and certain kinds of research activities. In numerous public debates in newspapers and on social media, teachers highlighted the need for students to return after lockdown and experience the classroom community, instead of facing pressure from test taking, which would only worsen the situation in the classroom.¹⁶

On the other hand, while the government recognised the inaccuracy of the national tests at the individual level, it argued that there is a need for aggregate knowledge about learning loss during the pandemic (Joel, 2021). The ministry stated, ‘We need to gain an overview of the impact on the academic level of homeschooling during lockdown – an overall level to compare with previous years’ (Ravn, 2021). Interestingly, the spokesperson on education of the Social Democrats, Jens Joel, referred to the OECD, allegedly arguing that the learning loss would mean a decrease in the gross domestic product. This argument testifies to the international dimension in the debates.

A second camp arguing for the national tests in the wake of the lockdown was the ‘what works’ segments of the research community. Lasse Hønge, chief analyst at The Danish Center for Social Science Research (VIVE), argued that tests can be used to generate useful aggregate results. On the other hand, Bundsgaard (2021) contended,

¹⁵ See <https://www.dr.dk/radio/p1/p1-morgen/p1-morgen-2021-04-08>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

The wastebasket is the right place to put the national tests. There are much better tools to assess students' academic level. Last year, the tests were so off that a result of three could just as easily be a seven or a two.

Bundsgaard recognised that the ministry had modified the national tests in an attempt to take critical evaluation into account but described them as a process of 'applying Scotch tape' and, instead, recommended relying on PIRLS and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data.

These arguments clearly reflect different priorities and perhaps even also ideas about the most important task of education, whether to secure human well-being or to sustain economic growth? The lockdown experience provided a tremendous boost to the human well-being side of this dichotomy. In the radio broadcast from February 2, 2021, about the national tests, Jacob Fuglsang, long-time reporter and commentator on education in Denmark, argued that the government's course must be understood as a result of the parliamentary situation, where the left-wing parties want to abolish the tests and the right-wing parties want to keep them. The Social Democratic government is trying to balance these positions, while the minister wants broad parliamentary backing for all new policies concerning schools.

Clearly reflecting the differences at the political level, the radio broadcast also contained an interesting debate between the Social Democrats and the Social Liberal Party, providing parliamentary backing for the minority one-party Social Democratic government. The new Social Liberal Party spokesperson on education, Lotte Rod, argued that the decision to conduct national testing immediately after the end of lockdown 'makes no sense, because students' needs should be the focus'. Joel, on the other side, argued that there is

Great freedom for local schools and that both assessments of student well-being and the national tests themselves have been improved. We need to know how strongly we have to react to the learning loss in the Folkeskole. At the school level, municipal level, and national level, the national tests can be used to say what the academic repercussions of the lockdown have been.

Against this view, Rod argued, 'The national tests cannot be used; they measure only a small part of the purposes of education. What is the purpose of using them? And will the test results be used for resource allocation? Crazy!'

Joel maintained that the tests are helpful 'for the sake of comparability. Even though there are errors, they are still useful. A new assessment system is the ambition, but the old system must be used until then'.

Rod replied that the national tests 'cannot be used, because they measure very narrowly. They do not give a general picture. We have to do what students need and not what politicians need'.

Joel insisted that ‘the purpose is to acquire knowledge about how the lockdown has affected school. What else do we use to measure? We stick to the argument that the tests provide knowledge about the current state of school in comparison with earlier measurements’.

For a final comment, Rod pointed out that ‘a whole array of stakeholders wants to be free of the national tests’.

The debate is interesting because it reveals that politicians were not agreeing on the most pressing problems to handle after the lockdown. Therefore, they did not agree on the solutions either.

In May 2021, an important development occurred. Three of the key actors in the educational field – the Teachers’ Union, the School Leader Association, and the Association of Municipalities, or Local Government Denmark – put forth a joint proposal about a new assessment system. The three organisations proposed that only reading and mathematical competences be tested, arguing that, of all the subjects taught, these are two crucial competences of great importance for the students’ benefit. In addition, the three parties proposed that the tests be spread out as much as possible over an entire school course, from year 1 to 9, making it easier to follow the students’ progression. In addition, the tests must be moved to the beginning of the school year, rather than placed at the end, so that the results can be better used in teaching. Finally, the new tests should be based on a linear principle, so that all students receive the same questions and tasks, unlike the current adaptive system, where questions are continuously adjusted according to the individual student’s right and wrong answers. This will give teachers much better opportunities to use the results in the organisation of teaching.¹⁷

In one of my interviews, a high-level politician participating in the negotiations about a new assessment system rightly pointed out that the end result of the negotiations would most likely be similar to the proposal from the three organisations, although probably without feedback to the parents on the test results and without the use of test in the lower grades (years 0 to 3, except where at-risk tests, such as testing for dyslexia, will play a role). The politician explained that the idea is to render assessments more in line with the progression over a school year. However, a change in the national standards, in the sense of doing away with the current curriculum regime, was also on the table. Special education was also a subject of debate, with some arguing that everyone must receive the same education and others arguing in favour of differentiation. The left-wing parties would like a sample system, which would mean a turnover of tests, so that each school would only partake within a certain interval of years. According to my interviewee, however, there was a majority at the

¹⁷ See <https://www.skolelederforeningen.org/nyheder-medier/nyheder/2021/kl-dlf-og-skolelederforeningen-foreslaar-ny-model-for-evaluering-og-bedoemmelse-i-folkeskolen>.

negotiating table for all schools being tested every year, but some resources might be earmarked for the 10% most challenged schools.

When asked about whether the experiences from the lockdown will play a role in the design of the new assessment system, the interviewee replied, 'I wish I could say yes, but unfortunately they do not'. The political process is primarily informed by knowledge from the advisory group, although some inspiration has been taken from Finland and Norway (which allegedly have systems very much in line with the proposal of the three interest organisations).

Eventually, the proposal from the Teachers' Union, the School Leader Association, and the Association of Municipalities, or Local Government Denmark formed the basis of the new political agreement. This proposal heralded the birth of the 'Together for School' initiative.

IV.e. Concluding discussion and particular points of interest

The policy process analysed in this chapter regarding a new quality assurance system for the Danish *Folkeskole* demonstrates that the classical core tensions remain on the table: the issue of centralisation/decentralisation¹⁸ and the issue of which purposes assessment serves (Mortensen, 2016). The former issue is reflected in debates about autonomy and accountability, and the assessment system clearly plays a major role in that conundrum. The latter issue gains momentum in debates about priorities and problematisations. Among the higher echelons, there is a strong need for data, monitoring, and accountability to guarantee efficiency and progress while providing evidence for Parliament and the government on how the education system is faring. This dimension is particularly visible in relation to low-performing schools and the links with indicators of the accountability system. At the lower echelons, the priorities are about accomplishing things on the ground – and having the freedom to find good solutions – as well as leaving room for professional judgement. Here the problem of schooling is first and foremost the well-being of the students – particularly accentuated by the lockdown period – as well as their formative development.

To a considerable extent, these tensions are also rooted in the professional outlooks of the actors: it makes a difference whether they involve a teacher, who tends to think about students, learning, and the classroom; a political scientist, who is concerned about obtaining the correct longitudinal data; or a bureaucrat, who is concerned with managing the system. These tensions are in evidence at the system level, the political level, and among interest groups and the educational research community, and they have an impact on the discourse

¹⁸ For a comparative study of this issue between Denmark, Norway and Sweden, see Foss Hansen, 2009. Foss Hansen finds that meso-evaluation (defined as evaluation institutionalized as an element in national educational policy) in Denmark and Norway is a rather new and still controversial phenomenon compared to Sweden which has a longer tradition in this area.

about which problems a quality assurance system is intended to solve and, therefore, which solutions are relevant and viable.

The sudden incursion of the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic meant that new practices had to be instituted, and the configuration of stakeholders was reshuffled. Teachers came to play a greater role in terms of educational assessment, and the authorities quickly found that they had to rely heavily on good solutions at the local level. Therefore, the authorities facilitated a greater degree of freedom in the area of assessment, with the suspension of all oral and written examinations, including the year 9 leavers' examination, as well the already instituted suspension of the national tests. However, as soon as the lockdown ended, the analysis shows how the authorities immediately revived practices from before the lockdown, not least in the area of education assessment, where the national tests – although only modified to a limited extent in the wake of the devastating critique of their validity raised prior to the pandemic – were again made mandatory.

To sum up and contextualise the policy process, this chapter has indicated the following issues involved in the formation of the quality assurance system. First, the parliamentary situation and the tradition for broad political agreement in education play a role in explaining what could be seen as a pragmatic turn in the process. Second, the key stakeholders – in the form of the Teachers' Union, the School Leader Association, and the Association of Municipalities – seem to have exerted considerable influence with their joint proposal on the end result. Ensuring the success of a new quality assurance system requires the collaboration of these three key partners. Third, considerable inertia seems to exist at the systemic level. Here we find concerns – among civil servants and among the what-works segment of the research community – about securing data flows and the consistent delivery of evidence for both governing and research purposes.

The political agreement about the new quality assurance system from October 2021 makes it clear that the government's initially strong statements about abolishing national tests and designing a new education assessment system has only led to more tests, a redesign of national tests from an adaptive to a linear format, and some changed practices along the lines of the proposal from the Teachers' Union, the School Leader Association, and the Association of Municipalities. It is nevertheless remarkable that the 'Together for School' initiative has been formed, for it holds the potential to serve as a platform able to involve all key stakeholders of education in Denmark. But the negotiations over key issues in the assessment system – such as screening for dyslexia and giftedness, the monitoring of low-performing schools, and the actual development of tests and test items – are only about to start. Criticism of the new political outline of the assessment system has already been raised by teachers and parts of the research community, including Kreiner and Bundsgaard.¹⁹

¹⁹ See e.g. <https://skolemonitor.dk/nyheder/art8523134/De-nye-test-bliver-ikke-mere-praecise-og-vil-skabe-mere-konkurrence-og-mistrivsel>.

V. Chapter 3: Research findings

The purpose of this chapter is to supplement chapter 2 by offering a presentation of the key findings from the state-of-the-art research literature in terms of the quality assurance and transition mechanisms in Danish education. This chapter connects the findings from the context description with the research findings in the literature. But given the somewhat polarised nature of education research in Denmark, the findings must be viewed considering the different types of research underpinning the findings. This section will therefore be introduced by a brief description of the educational research landscape in Denmark.

V.a. The educational research landscape in Denmark

Examination of the configurations of the field of education research in Denmark depicts a rather acrimonious research environment. Researchers associated with the development of education policy constitute one camp, whereas a host of critical researchers make up another. Thus, it is fair to say that Danish education research often finds itself in a very toxic environment, with significant antagonism between at least two main clusters, one being the evidence-based what works type of research and the other being research adhering to pedagogical ideals about *Bildung* and emancipation, as well as the notion of pedagogy being a unique field with its own values and contributions (Rømer, 2017).

Overall, it is possible to discern two different philosophical and methodological paradigms cutting across the education research in Denmark: i) an empirical positivist approach based on findings drawn from measurement data and ii) a sociologically oriented approach - which could be both empirical and theoretical - incorporating the human, cultural, historical, conceptual, and material dimensions of education (Ydesen, 2022a).

The empirical positivist paradigm is often guided by an applied, “what-works”, “best practice”, and all-other-things-being-equal philosophical approach to research. The research questions occupying this paradigm are typically concerned with the insights that data can provide into how students learn, how learning processes can be optimised, how teachers can teach more effectively, and how exclusionary practices can be avoided (e.g. Wittrup, 2016). It often pursues the ideal of educational contexts as laboratories from which data can be extracted and improve our practices and policies. In this sense, there is a strong inclination to establish comparability based on single entities be that individual students, classes, cohorts, schools, local and regional authorities, or even national education systems.

The sociologically oriented paradigm is generally guided by an ambition to contextually decipher the meanings, workings and implications of education policies and schooling practices; sometimes even to de-naturalise the natural in order to gain new insights. It is in this tradition that we find several research agendas, such as critical policy analysis and sociology of education, and an aim to expose the inherent power relations in education contexts. In this respect, Diem and Young (2015) tellingly describe how, “critical policy researchers engage in critique, interrogate the policy process, and the epistemological roots

of policy work, examine the players involved in the policy process, reveal policy constructions, and consider how policies and the problems they address might appear if reframed from a different perspective” (p. 841).

V.b. Findings about quality assurance, evaluation, and accountability

As already indicated in chapter 2, the national tests have drawn much attention from researchers ever since they were introduced. Much of the research takes a critical stance towards the tests which in their first years of existence seemed to lead a life in a protective bubble. As found by Skedsmo, Rönnerberg & Ydesen (2021), the national tests were an expensive and high-profile prestige project of the Ministry of Education. In that sense, the national tests were largely a preordained success, remaining immune to criticism for several years.²⁰ At the same time, the national tests and the strong focus on attainment, assessment and accountability have been strongly defended by the chairman of the Danish PISA consortium since 2000, Professor Niels Egelund from the Danish School of Education. Another leading figure in this encampment is Professor Lars Qvortrup, who at the time was dean of the Danish School of Education and who worked closely with Egelund. It is striking that Egelund, Qvortrup, and their colleagues, Professor Jens Rasmussen and Andreas Rasch-Christensen, head of research at VIA University College, served on a number of ministerial committees and institutions surrounding all the recent education reforms in Denmark (Ydesen, Kauko & Magnúsdóttir, 2022).

From a statistical and psychometric perspective, Professor Peter Allerup (2016) offers a balanced critique of the national tests arguing that there is a possible gain to be harvested from the adaptive design of the national test but that the tests display considerable shortcomings; not least that students, teachers, and parents find it hard to utilize the test results in the intended manner.

From a sociological perspective, Associate Professor Karen Andreasen (2016) finds that the national tests played a significant role for the schooling practice and for students’ self-image of their potentials and development. Adding to this perspective, Holm (2016) concludes that the national tests play a prevalent role vis-à-vis parents where the tests become central for the construction of ability. Holm also points out how the national tests influence the pedagogical practices in the classroom through backwash effects and rehearsal tests aimed to prepare the students for the real tests. Helene Ratner (2022), in a more recent article, finds that visualizations of large datasets may affect teachers’ pedagogical understandings of students’ performance.

From her qualitative studies, Andreasen (2016) also finds that teachers found it hard to translate test results into formative evaluative practices benefitting the individual students.

²⁰ The Government Auditor [*Rigsrevisionen*] has estimated the cost of developing the national tests (between 2005 and 2010) at about 16.5 million USD.

This finding resonates well with Allerup's quantitative finding and the findings by Bundsgaard and Puck (2016) in their large survey of teachers' engagement with the national tests.

In terms of accountability and the tension between centralization and decentralization, Andersen et al. (2016), in their analysis of municipal quality reports, call for the introduction of a dialogue tool with greater flexibility in terms of local needs and priorities and with lesser rigidity in terms of form, structure and content. As such, they argue that local schools must be given the opportunity to define individual qualities and needs along with a democratic and professional latitude for school management, teachers, parents and student, in order to make accountability meaningful at the local level.

Resonating this argument, Bjørnholt (2016) emphasizes the necessity of balancing and combining professional outlooks with managerial outlooks. The point is that the gearing between administrative levels must be improved. A pitfall in that respect is pointed out by Harlen (2016) who underscores the dangers – or limitations – associated with using summative data for formative practices and vice versa.

In a historical analysis of accountability practices in Danish education, Ydesen and Andreasen (2014) point out that,

Outside critiques from various angles concerning the educational system's proficiency standards are a strong driver of educational accountability. For instance, such critiques have worked to promote test-based accountability measures at least since the interwar years. Criticism creates proponents of accountability measures both inside and outside the educational system. Thus, political persons or parents, with their children's interests at stake, might express such demands, as well as education management and policy agents (p. 23).

V.c. Findings about transitions to general and vocational upper secondary education

One of the important findings in the international literature concerning transitions from compulsory education to general and vocational upper secondary education is that teachers and schools tend to work with a logic of deficiency when it comes to students and their problems in schooling (Tomlinson, 2017). One example is when schools adopt a policy of taking a hard stance on breaches of their behaviour policies because it entails in a behaviouristic sense that the student is to blame, and that the student's behaviour can be corrected via negative sanctions or corrective interventions. This logic of deficiency – blaming the student – is often rooted in what could be called bell-curve thinking, namely, the assumption that achievement is distributed along a normal curve with 'most' children achieving expected outcomes and 'some' children at the either ends of the bell curve. In this sense, Hansen et al. (2020) demonstrate that schools often target and seek to compensate the needs of the student but seldom involve changing the professional practice of teachers

and other educators, including their collaboration. This finding is an important reminder that schools and education systems in a wider sense must constantly reflect upon whether their learning environments are in fact hospitable to all student and in particular which students might actually find the environment inhospitable.

Concerning the use of tests and exams for determining education transitions, Rasmussen (2016) finds that such evaluation technologies tend to reaffirm students and teachers' perceptions of academic ability and proficiency. This mechanism comes to the surface when,

the student who normally does well and gets good marks in school associates a less good test result with being unlucky, and when the student who has been used to doing less well associates good test results with being lucky. The tests, together with other evaluation activities at school, will thus have an indirect impact on the students' further choice of education.

Herein lies an important factor behind education systems' inability to overcome the reproduction of social inequalities and student identities.

VI. Chapter 4: Key takeaways

Based on the experiences and developments in Denmark concerning quality assurance in a decentralized education operating in a global and challenged world, the report carries some important insights which are useful for the process of developing a new quality assurance system in Norway.

The first takeaway is that decoupling between administrative levels and key stakeholders can have detrimental effects. For instance, when chains of accountability from the global, the national, to the local, and to the student/family create distortions and unintended outcomes of perhaps otherwise sound ideas about what education is for and can do. Such distortions might arise through the decision or implementation processes but also through the very tools and technologies that are tasked with sustaining and underpinning quality assurance in education. Notably a good assessment instrument in one area and for one purpose might be damaging in another and for other purposes. Consequently, it is imperative that policy makers and stakeholders frame future educational reforms and interventions by giving due attention to what the purpose of the education system is and perhaps even to prioritize between these purposes.

Another takeaway from this report is the consideration of human diversity as the salient pedagogical condition of education in general and of schooling in particular. In designing a quality assurance system, recognition of this condition must induce a focus on the consequences for stakeholders – especially students and teachers – associated with different policies, practices, and instruments. A key concern here could be to ensure that education is able to create positive learning environments and, ultimately, also destinations for all children

and young people (Friche, Enemark & Ydesen, 2021). This again draws attention to the culture and structures of recognition – both in the classroom and in the education system, and even the labour market as such – as well as the required level of standardisation in examinations and tests. Trust, transparency, fairness, equity, and acceptance are central in this connection (Holm-Larsen, 2016). A particular point of interest in this respect is the degree of data literacy among stakeholders (Lisborg et al. 2021). This is important for ensuring that assessment data are used as a pedagogical tool for teacher and student development, instead of distorted representations of success and failure.

To sum up, the key points of reflection for the design process of a viable, fair, and efficient quality assurance system in an education system of the Nordic education model are:

- Consider the purpose of the quality assurance system – a good assessment technology in one area might be damaging in another (prioritize!)
- Consider the interests and positions of stakeholders (360 degrees) (which stakeholders are advantaged/disadvantaged in different models of quality assurance systems?)
- Consider human diversity as a condition for every educational and schooling activity (which consequences should the system entail for which stakeholders? Which levels – or possibilities - of flexibility should the system contain? How can the system support the creation of positive destinations for all students? And how might the system ensure that all students can be recognized for what they bring to the learning arena?)
- Consider which assessment and evaluations tools should be used and which level of standardization is required (exams, tests, portfolios, teachers' statements, inspections, samples)?
- How can the system be designed to underpin the desired culture, values, and democratic transparency in the education system and in local schools?
- Consider the degree of data literacy among stakeholders and how to achieve it in order to avoid unintended of data and the development of perverse or counterproductive practices at all levels of the education system?

The present report offers at least some insights into possibilities and pitfalls for how to constructively engage with these questions.

It is my hope that *Kvalitetsutviklingsutvalget* will be able to deliver possible and coherent solutions for the Norwegian government that will allow the establishment of a quality assurance system for the Norwegian public school system that will work for the improvement of Norwegian public education for all stakeholders and serve as a model of inspiration for other education systems in the world and in particular future-proof the Nordic model of education.

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