

Per Kristensen is former headmaster for private schools in Denmark. He has been active in boards for private school organizations from 1985. He was the chairman for the Danish umbrella organization for independent schools 1992 to 2009. Since 2001 he has been the Secretary General for ECNAIS, European Council of National Associations of Independent Schools. He was member of the board for the Danish Institute for Educational Environment (www.DCUM.dk) from 2001 to 2009. Today Per Kristensen is the chairman for the "Det internationale RÅD", through which Danish School organizations for independent schools are connected to ECNAIS.

Educational environment and school culture

Per Kristensen, Denmark

This article opens up the possibility to see the educational environment as part of a school's overall culture. The innovative school where the school's entire environment supports creativity, initiative and training in forming relationships and strengthen the child's personality, is a strong element in the Danish school tradition. This applies to both the public and the free schools.

Focus on children's and young people's educational environment means that the school's core tasks are changing from creating measurable academic skills and knowledge to a broader concept. In this broader concept the school will work diligently to ensure that children and students live in an environment that is safe; that it feels safe for the individual child and student and that the environment provides the best growing conditions for the individual in terms of academic, personal and social development.

In order to identify the good learning environment, it is natural to look at the school buildings, teaching, playing, classmates, leadership, teachers and several other factors. In order to approach good learning environment the pupils and students must be involved and their points of view and their wishes must be taken into account.

Although children do not experience their environment in school is divided into the dimensions of psychological, physical and aesthetic environment, it still makes sense to use these three dimensions when we indicate ways to improve the educational environment.

So ask the children about what they see and what they want, listen to their diversity of ideas and notions - and include this wealth of knowledge in the process toward a good learning environment.

The concept of "school culture" is an interdisciplinary reflection of the many factors which individually - and particularly interact with each other, - it is the foundation of the educational environment in a group, in a class and in the school as a society. My knowledge of school culture, how this culture is founded and how it can be crucial for school work and school quality is based on experience and numerous interviews with the children, their parents and teachers. It is based on a lot of "good stories" which are reports from classes where the children learn, are developing and thrive.

A school culture should be based on a set of values that are the foundation of a school's identity. The core values must be widely accepted by parents and school staff to make an impact. Children must be able to understand it. Therefore, it is probably a good idea to spread the process in which the value set is created and formulated, in addition to the whole school - even among parents and staff.

The core values might include values such as:

Honesty
Mutual respect
Reliability
Humor
Personal courage
Openness
Immersion
Curiosity

The values need to be separately elaborated and explained.

In a vibrant school culture these values are translated into and incorporated in the patterns formed of children playing and socializing with both adults and other children. And the values show up in children's interaction with the physical environment, - playground, - materials, etc.

"School Culture" can be understood as an overarching and unifying concept. One must require that "good school culture" is locally based, accepted and wanted. The good school culture must leave its mark throughout the school and in school life. Even when a class leaves school buildings, is on tour or on excursions. It may be felt when the new parents and children for the first time meet school. It must be integrated in the school's traditions, buildings, interior design, decoration, in playground construction, etc. It must be recognizable in the working environment for school staff.

A few examples of "arenas" where school culture must be appreciable:

- *The adults meet with each other* - as parents, at the school/home interviews, in the dialogue in the staff room, in the dialogue manager/parent, in the dialogue between different groups of employees, etc. It is essential that the adults assume to be role models - because they provide a framework for children's school.
- *The adult's meeting with the children* – at the playground, in teaching, in after school care. The adults are aware, they participate or intervene. Students experience the adults as visible and as carriers of the school's values.
- *Children's approach to teaching* - their understanding of what it is to learn, how teachers can be helpful, and which positive use they may have in peers, materials, etc.
- *Teachers' and educators' approach to learning* - there must be no discrepancy between the values and norms of a math class and an art class, which is not to be confused with a requirement that all adults should act similar to the children.
- *The children's manners with each other* - in games and in different organizational forms of teaching.
- *The school leadership* plays an important role in ensuring that conversations about values, goals and targets are spread out over the school in its entirety.

Denmark is the only European country with a special law for education and children's environment. The law requires the individual school or child care center to prepare a written report of the environment, including an action plan to improve the educational environment. The law has been in force since 2001 and it states that children and adolescents have the right to a good learning environment which ensures that teaching can take place of safety and health. The law has no penalties attached. The whole idea behind the law is to create local awareness on the schools environment, and to make progress through dialog.