

2011 Teacher Exchange Program

Dapto High School and Viborg Katedralskole

Democracy in Denmark

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1) Description of Current Practice

The vibrant student participation at Viborg Katedralskole in the wider life of the Danish community delighted and impressed during my exchange in 2011. The political campaign, prior to the Danish election held on the 15th September, revealed students to be very actively engaged, with the political dialogue of the nation. Australian schools (and democracy) would benefit greatly from considering Danish approaches to maintaining and extending civil society.

There were several impressive examples of teacher and school organisation to educate about the political process and election issues:

1. a highly structured panel pre-election debate in the school hall
2. a student organised evening event for local political candidates
3. a speech by the former prime minister
4. an election night event (vigil) at the school

All nine political parties appeared in the school assembly hall to debate policies and answer student questions. I have never witnessed such an event, pre-election in NSW and feel the benefits to students would be enormous:

1. The candidates were lined up, on the stage, seated from left to right befitting their political ideology. This was such a clear visual cue for students in the process of deepening their understanding of politics
2. Students clapped and cheered points well made. There was no heckling, booing or negativity, occasionally some laughter but in good spirit. There was friendly interaction amongst the politicians and laughter. Watching the two young politicians, sitting at completely opposite ends of the stage, interacting good naturedly, was wonderful.
3. Students had many questions and there was not enough time for everyone to make their points. It was a thoughtful process that Finn, a teacher, chaired.

There seems to be a genuinely higher level of engagement with politics in Denmark than I have witnessed in Australian or British schools.

2) Findings

Students participate more actively in the life of the school and community in Denmark. Student representatives discuss with the 'rektor' (principal) issues such as budgets, expenditure, school policy and future directions. Students have a right to form a student council at their school and they are represented on the

school board. The school must ensure that the students are involved in the planning of teaching in their class. The national student organisations have the right to appoint two members to the council that advises the Minister of Education on the upper secondary education programs.

Students independently organise events. Discourse about their democracy, in social situations and at school, is much more evident than among Australian students. The dialogue is authentic and deemed to be central to life in Denmark.

It is interesting to note that the Danes have a very low disparity between the wealthiest and most disadvantaged citizens.

3) Recommendations

Schools in NSW need to encourage more authentic political debate to nurture our civil society. The current rules for NSW school principals, about politicians participating in any area of the life of the school, is located in the Controversial Issues in Schools policy:

1. Schools are neutral grounds for rational discourse and objective study. They are not arenas for opposing political views or ideologies.

This policy may be stifling authentic engagement with democratic debate in our schools. Students have overly sanitised political experience and one that lacks authenticity.

The *Melbourne Declaration on the Educational Goals for Young Australians* has the goal to develop 'active and informed citizens' with moral and ethical integrity. Our school systems do a good job with educating Young Australians to "...have an understanding of Australia's system of government, history and culture' but that we do not do an adequate job with assisting students preparation to authentically '...participate in Australia's civic life' by experiencing the political process and engaging with ideas.

The Danish model of pre-election events allows for, an 'arena of opposing political views' and ideologies at school. These events model 'ideas' being respectfully challenged, not individuals. In the vernacular, candidates model 'playing the ball not the player'. This is authentic model would strengthen Australian democracy through student engagement and is consistent with national goals.

Bibliography

The Ministry of Children and Education <http://uvm.dk/> (accessed 11/2/2012)

Melbourne Declaration on the Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008)

Darcy Moore's blog <http://darcymoore.net/2011/11/12/the-melbourne-declaration-democracy-and-school/>