

# Training of Adult Education Teachers in Denmark<sup>1</sup>

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## The context

Denmark is a constitutional monarchy. The population is five million. Denmark has a cultural affinity with the other Nordic countries (Sweden, Norway, Iceland and Finland) in Europe. The total population of the Nordic region is 22 million. Denmark is a member of the European Union and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Denmark has a long tradition of adult education. The tradition is linked to democratic development and to the formation of 'folk' high schools in the second half of the nineteenth century. There is a tradition for a large proportion of the population participating in adult education and that the government ensures substantial resources in terms of financing and classrooms.

## The extent of adult learning

The Nordic countries are among the countries in Europe and within the OECD which has the highest participation rates in adult education. The proportion of the adult population (25-64 years) who participated in adult education in Denmark was 56% in 2004. The results from a comparative study, named Eurobarometer, shows that it was the highest proportion of the European countries in the study (Chisholm, 2004).

An OECD survey with figures from 2006 shows that 45% of the adult population in Denmark participates in formal and non-formal education within one year. The average for OECD was 40% (OECD, 2010).

Participation is characterized by:

- mainly young adults who attend. Young adults (aged 25-34) have a participation rate that is twice as high as that of older people (aged 55-64).
- a clear correlation between educational attainment and participation. Thirty per cent of adults with an education below upper secondary participate, compared to 63% participation by adults with a tertiary education.
- a clear correlation between work type and education. There are twice as many high-skilled white collar workers compared as low-skilled blue collar workers.

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Denmark is among the countries with the most comprehensive job-related non-formal education. The average level of participation is more than 80 hours per participant per year.

### **Objectives of the adult education programme**

Adult education is seen as a part of the democratic tradition. Historically, the Danish *popular education* (named '*folk enlightenment*'), has been a part of the Danish culture and self-understanding. The authorities have provided opportunities for groups of citizens to gather around learning a topic. For many years it has been a part of the official education policy to support such learning and educational activities. It has been emphasized that it is the citizens themselves who decides which subjects that they want to learn about or become better to cope with. The subjects could be language acquisition, china painting, exercise, environmental understanding or local politics. There is basically no limit to the subjects chosen. The Government subsidizes these activities and provides facilities.

The theory behind this policy is that participation in adult learning contributes to social cohesion. A high proportion of participation will make for a more efficient and stable *democracy*. Additionally, adult education enables *personal development*.

Another purpose of adult education is to ensure a high level of *general or key competences*. The programmes cover subjects at primary and secondary school level, for example, mathematics, science, written and spoken Danish, and foreign languages. The objective is to ensure that adults who do not have these skills can get them at no cost and without difficulty.

A third purpose is that adult education should contribute to securing a fair distribution of welfare goods, of which acquisition of competence is one of the most important. In other words, adult education should contribute to *equality in society*. Priority is given to adult learners with under ten years' formal schooling. The final purpose is to ensure the continuous *qualification of the workforce*.

*Lifelong learning*, in which adult education plays a key role, has been given a priority in the Danish educational policy for the last 40 years. As an important part of the educational policy, lifelong learning has *four equally-weighted objectives*:

- Strengthening democracy through participation in free and open competence development
- Ensuring personal development and quality of life for the citizens
- Ensuring equality through education, with emphasis on participation by the low-skilled
- Development of professional competence and flexibility in a changing labour market

These four objectives meet the requirements of educational policy in all five Nordic countries.

## Adult learning institutions

There are three types of adult education programmes in Denmark:

1. Popular adult education institutions offering non-formal education.
2. Adult Education Centres providing formal general competences up to secondary level.
3. Labour market education programmes providing vocational training up to skilled level.

The three types are of similar size but with quite different objectives, structures and content. The Ministry of Education oversees their administration and legislation.. However, they each have different laws, a different organizational structure, and different financial aid opportunities. The guiding aim from the Ministry of Education is improved co-operation between the three types of institutions.

University teaching is normally not regarded as adult education in Denmark.

## Adult teachers

It can be seen as a paradox that in spite of the extensive and comprehensive adult education activities in Denmark, there are no formal requirements for adult pedagogical competences to be employed as teacher in adult education.

In Denmark we have a strong background in adult education research. We have elaborate training programs for adult educational teachers. But there is no mandatory adult pedagogical training for adult education teachers, and no formal requirements for employment. Today anyone can be employed in adult education without formal adult pedagogical competences (all that is required is professional knowledge in the field to be taught).

Part of the explanation is historical. As mentioned above, adult teaching is based on a liberal tradition. As part of this tradition, those who have something to tell others can do so, for instance in a study group or in a folk high school. Adult teachers have traditionally and primarily been driven by an interest in their subjects and ability to transform this interest into interesting lectures. There has not been an emphasis on formal qualifications.

For many years there has been an ongoing discussion about the extent to which adult educators should be *professionals*, similar to the status, for instance, of Danish elementary school teachers. Presently there are no such requirements.

In most contexts, adult teaching staff will obtain teaching skills and pedagogical theoretical insight through continuing education and training alongside their work as an adult teacher or educator. This training can be formal, as part of the public educational system, or it may be non-formal in the form of workplace-related courses or pedagogical development activities (Milana & Larson, 2010).

The formal adult educational training is available at three levels:

- Adult Teacher Education Programmes, which provide basic adult educational skills and knowledge. This training is done at an Adult Education Centre.
- Diploma in Adult Education. This training is at the undergraduate level and takes place at university colleges. The amount of training is a year taken part time.
- Master's in Adult Education. This training is at master's level and takes place at a university. The training scale is one year and is normally part time. It includes adult life and learning processes, learning and skills in work and organizations and competence in the knowledge society.

There are opportunities to build up a Nordic Master's in Adult Education by combining modules from different courses.

The Danish School of Education, University of Aarhus currently offers an international English-language Master's in Lifelong Learning (MALL).

Adult teachers' formal competence development is – as already mentioned – normally connected with, and runs parallel to, their practical work as adult teachers.

### **Continuing education in practice**

A significant proportion of the adult educational training in Denmark is in the form of short courses, often in relation to specific developmental processes in teaching or educational institution (Wahlgren, Danneskiold-Samsøe, Hemmingsen, & Larson, 2002, English summary).

A concrete and typical example of such skill developing is a pedagogical project carried out at four Adult Education Centres in Copenhagen. The project focuses on introducing the pedagogical method, *co-operative learning*, to the teachers and to implement it at the institutions. The method can be described as structured group work, where learning takes place through the use of a variety of different group work constellations, called structures.

The project included four teacher groups that were trained to use the method. Competence development took place in close association with the teachers' teaching practice. It lasted one year and included:

- Preliminary preparation for the approach through reading the textbook on Co-operative Learning
- A two-day course that includes practical teaching and training methods
- Application of the method in their teaching
- Implementation of seven coaching sessions over a year
- Follow-up course where the experiences were systematized in relation to specific practices
- Writing logs three times during the process in which teachers reflect on experiences with the use of the method

- Knowledge exchange in teacher teams across disciplines.

A research team has evaluated the process. The research data consist of focus group interviews conducted at two stages of the project, and a content analysis of the completed logs. The evaluation concluded that it was a very efficient learning strategy. The educators were able to apply the method of co-operative learning after only two months, and in fact they did too. The teachers' level of reflection was high even at the first log completion. However they did not increase further in the process. Coaching sessions were important motivational elements (Larsen & Wahlgren, 2010).

What characterizes this teacher training process that it takes place in close relation with the teacher's daily practice. Teachers are trained to apply the new method as they learn it. The relevant pedagogical theory is connected with current practice. The teachers are trained to become reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983).

### **Pedagogical principles and theories**

There is evidence-based research concerning methods and effectiveness of teacher training in relation to adult learners (Larsen, 2009). Danish education of teachers is based on this knowledge. It is mainly oriented toward a humanist critical tradition (Brookfield, 1996; Jarvis, 2005).

The primary in-service training is based on the principles of reflection in practice and practice learning. Practice learning is based on the situations and problems faced by the teacher in practice: for instance, improving questioning techniques in the classroom, knowing how to plan a lesson, understanding how to activate participants, and the art of evaluating teaching. These practical experiences are systematized and integrated with theoretical knowledge through a process of reflection.

On that theoretical basis, it can be asked: What should an adult educator be able to accomplish in modern adult education in Denmark? What skills are necessary to be a reflective adult educator? The answer is that good adult educator must:

- Have deep insight into how to convey the subject, which means to have insight into the subject's theories and be able to tailor their methods according to participants' assumptions
- Be able to foster a learning environment where there is commitment, confidence and tolerance
- Be able to motivate learning and overcome resistance to it
- Create learning situations that encompass creating challenges and stimulating students' reflection
- Enable learners' application of classroom theory to real-life situations, which requires an ability to connect with participants' needs and experiences, and to adapt pedagogic theories and methods to these

- Understand the pedagogical culture at the teaching institution and collaborate with colleagues
- Broadly, one can say that adult educators must support and facilitate students' learning processes.

To deepening the understanding of the application of the principles listed above, it is necessary to know that there is Danish (and Nordic) tradition of a short distance of power between teachers and students. Democracy is a part of teaching: students have a significant influence on training implementation.

## Conclusion

Danish adult education is founded on the principle of democracy. One core function of the adult teaching programme is to empower adults to participate equally in the Danish democratic process. Moreover, the teaching style is democratic in itself: adult learners take an active role in managing their learning.

Good adult education, therefore, is based on the participants' active involvement and on the teacher's ability to build on participants' experiences.

Adult education teachers in Denmark must be trained in this principle. They must be able to create engaged and critical participants who can apply what is learned, in their continuing competence development and in the workplace.

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