

Evidence or Advocacy?

Visual Arts Education in Denmark

Buhl, Mie

Publication date:
2015

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Buhl, M. (2015). *Evidence or Advocacy? Visual Arts Education in Denmark*. Abstract from InSEA 2015 Risks and opportunities for visual arts education in Europe, Lissabon, Portugal.
<http://www.insea.org/docs/inseapublications/proceedings/proceedingsInSEAEuropeancongressLisbon2015.pdf>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal -

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at vbn@aub.aau.dk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Evidence or Advocacy? – Visual Arts Education in Denmark

Mie Buhl, PHD, Professor

Aalborg University, Copenhagen, Denmark

Introduction

This paper presents and discusses the current role of Danish visual arts education in the compulsory school system. Denmark recently implemented a major school reform “How to make a good school better” (Ministry of Education, 2014), that focuses on core competences in the subjects Reading and Math. The reform emphasizes an open approach to various constellations of teaching and learning and includes a national tool for increasing the assessment of core competences.

I examined visual arts education in the new educational landscape based on the agreement between the government and a broad range of political parties and used national and international reports on schools since 2006 (Bamford & Qvortrup, 2006; Ministry of Education, 2012a, 2012b; UNESCO, 2006, 2010; Winner, Goldstein, & Lancrin, 2013). I examine the New Common Objectives Act for visual arts in school articulated in the reform (Ministry of Education, 2013, 2014).

My aim is to discuss the impact of the educational discourse of evidence in which all school subjects are defined in the new reform. The discourse of evidence focuses on competences aimed at utility and future employment prospects. The new learning objectives for visual arts reflect a development that creates a paradox between the core of visual arts (to express impressions to achieve knowledge about the world) and the demand for a cognitive learning outcome.

IT and media, innovation, and entrepreneurship are now implemented in school subjects in which students are taught that their visual expression should be useful to others. At the same time, the reform sets up learning objectives connected to technical skills for visual idioms such as painting, drawing, and sculpture. This gives rise to the question: Are we witnessing the vanishing of a former school subject in favor of a new hybrid of entrepreneurship, technology, and painting? Or has the Danish school system reached an evolutionary phase where visual arts and culture are a learning matter outside the school system performed by artists instead of art teachers and leave art teachers in charge of technical skills? Has the current development generated a new mode of advocacy in which the school subject exists only as a utility for external stakeholders?

Background

Visual arts education is being challenged by the Danish educational system in which the arts languish and the educational focus is on Reading and Math. This situation is not new, and the pressure on the threatened teaching subject has increased now that evidence is emphasized more in order to legitimate schooling. In the evidence discourse in which the score of visual arts is low, visual arts education is being forced to legitimate itself by advocating.

The line of Danish visual arts education can be traced back to the first law of schools (1814) in which drawing was a significant activity and had a clear purpose: preparing for future craftsmanship for boys and crafts for girls (Pedersen, 2004). Drawing was a necessary skill for executing daily work. There was no need to prove the importance of achieving the necessary skills; the practical purpose was obvious. According to Pedersen, this is followed by an artistic approach to visual arts education, which together with crafts comprises the focus on the objectives to teach (Pedersen, 2004). The next significant trend was based on reform pedagogical ideas and developed in the late 1950s when pedagogical ideas become drivers of political decisions. A more child-centered approach to visual arts that focused on the child's personal expression was implemented in

the curriculum, and the purpose was explained by the need for general education and formation. Media such as paint and clay were added to the repertoire for visual activity. The next trend emerged in the late '70s when the communicative aspect became part of the school subject. Visual activities were considered a particular language that comprises an important component of children's development and general education. By adding the communicative aspect, a critical approach to the images in mass media was applied along with the activities already performed, which was also emphasized by the addition of electronic media in the curriculum in the '80s. The it became important to advocate for the societal importance of being a critical consumer of massive visual information and generating a personal expressive skill. In the beginning of the 1990s, the teaching subject was given a new name and changed from Formation to Visual Arts. This name indicates a connection to fine arts in methods as well as content. The new name and focus emphasized the importance of giving all Danish children access to meet and work with art forms as a general approach to be a participant and citizen in a democratic society.

Given the history of the 1960s and the late 1970s, visual arts education in Denmark has never been discipline-based. A thematic approach has been developed since the 1980s (Buhl, 2005) and along with recent developments in visual culture and the ability to study one's surroundings with a selective and positioned glance, visual arts education in the new millennium aimed at embracing the late modern complex of diverse visual forms and practices and the theoretical currents of late modern philosophy (Buhl, 2002, 2011; Illeris, 2002).

However, given the developments in international school systems, the Danish system experienced a new discourse based on unsatisfactory scores in international reports of school children's scores in Reading and Math skills. Until then, Denmark had been proud of a system that educated future adults to be collaborative, democratic, and debating citizens, but Danish students scored low on basic skills on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2000-2012,

which did not include visual arts skills. The Danish discourse in educational science changed since the dominant voice in the political debate has been and is evidence-based education. Evidence has entered the discourse in educational science and resulted in a paradigmatic shift, which is shown in the new system of learning objectives and instruments for measuring students' skills. The paradigmatic shift had consequences for visual arts education that are revealed in the learning objectives of the new school reform.

The School Subject under the Microscope

When Danish students first scored only average on the OECD's PISA, visual arts education was not directly affected. Probably because the significance of visual arts education did not appear crucial to future education planners and because the subject is compulsory up to fifth grade (optional in Grades 7–9) and has no testing tradition. Indirectly, the subject was challenged by an international discussion that originated into United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO, 2006) positive focus on the importance of art education and recommendations for supporting visual arts education in national curricula. The UNESCO's advocacy for art education led to an examination of art education in Denmark.

International reports stated that many activities occur in Danish schools, but the outcomes were not documented or evaluated (Bamford & Qvortrup, 2006). Furthermore, a set of recommendations for supporting art education were made including suggestions for improving evaluation practices in the school subject and inviting artists and other practitioners into the school (Bamford & Qvortrup, 2006). The recommendations in Bamford and Qvortrup's report did not lead to improved conditions for practicing visual arts education in the school system. Instead of increasing the number of visual arts lessons in school, the number remained the same or decreased. Instead of offering visual art teachers supplementary courses for professional development, national initiatives for implementing house artists in schools, school services at art museums, and municipal cultural initiatives increased.

These initiatives were likeable, but from an educational perspective, they were insufficient for a continuous educational progression. Imagine math being performed by a house mathematician who visits the school maybe twice during a student's school years. Or imagine a school class visiting a math institution and being introduced to significant math by a brilliant mathematician. Visual arts education requires long and steady practice similar to math. This comparison may be speculative and polemic. One cannot compare visual arts and math. Exactly, one cannot compare them. Nevertheless, these types of comparisons are made all the time but in reverse. Visual arts education experiences this comparison in the evidence discourse.

Nationally, visual arts education was evaluated with other so-called practical arts subjects comprising music education, handiwork and woodwork, and home economics. A mapping of the conditions and status of the subjects and experimental projects was conducted and evaluated (Ministry for Education, 2012a, 2012b). The assessment revealed that only 41% of teachers who practice visual arts education were trained visual art teachers and that the subject had a low status and was regarded as a break from more serious activities.

Evidence or Advocacy?

The OECD report *Art for Art's Sake* (Winner et al., 2013) examined the impact of art education from the perspective of cognitive outcomes and tested the transfer hypothesis. Artistic school activities were examined to improvement of cognitive outcomes in other school subjects. The report addressed an issue that may provide critical evidence that visual arts education has a place in school. The authors followed the trend of evidence, and the title of my paper borrows the header from the report—but in reverse. I wish to question whether evidence is the proper legitimization for visual arts education and whether it is even possible to examine visual arts in the same way as exact science school subjects such as mathematics and other sciences based on

calculation. Do experimental studies and causal inference deliver the final evidence that schools should prioritize visual arts education?

It is not a surprise that the evidence trend has reached visual arts education along with other school subjects. This seems to be the dominant discourse for decisions about developing school systems in many countries due to the PISA results. Winner et al. (2013) concluded in their report on the impact of arts education that there was no evidence that visual arts education enhances academic skills or verbal skills. Only a few studies reveal indications of transfer. Two correlational studies revealed that students who study visual arts are stronger in geometric reasoning than students who do not (Winner et al., 2013). One experimental study showed that visual arts enhance students' observational skills. Thus, visual arts have transfer value in only two areas of cognitive outcome: students' geometric skills and observational skills. There is no evidence that visual arts improve verbal or mathematical skills.

The Danish New Common Objectives for Learning Outcome

The evidence trend has influenced the Danish school system in several ways. Danish students' average performance among OECD countries (Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 1) led to the Danish government (the Social Democrats, the Social Liberal Party, and the Socialist People's Party), the Liberal Party of Denmark, and the Danish People's Party implemented a substantial reform of Danish public schools. The Ministry of Education explained the reform was driven by the insufficient academic standards proved by the PISA scores in Reading and Math and insufficient improvement of potential of academically weak or gifted students in the political agreement (Ministry of Education, 2013). The emphasized qualities of preparing students to understand and participate in democratic processes to prepare to be future citizens created other problems (Ministry of Education, 2013).

The overall diagnosis was that schools need academic improvements exemplified by Reading and Math, and the medicine was improved evidence-based education. One of the ways to meet the challenge of improving academic standards was to intensify measurement and to standardize the tools for measuring all school subjects. The culture of evidence became the model for developing tools, and the ministry stressed the need to simplify existing learning objectives that were considered too complex and too oriented toward content.

The new learning objectives were modeled to suit a common template following predefined standards for measuring the level of knowledge, skills, and competence. The new template was based on the causal logic that relevant knowledge, skills, and competences should be measurable. This was supported by the terminology that also served the evidence discourse.

Template for the Syllabus

The new syllabus for each subject comprises an introductory chapter explaining the intentions of the school subject (here visual arts): a two-step process of objectives for learning outcome, one after second grade and one after fifth grade specifying the objectives for learning outcome in skills, knowledge, and competences. The syllabus comprises three cross-disciplinary topics implemented in all school subjects: language development (meaning how each subject contributes to improving language skills), IT and media (meaning how IT and media are implemented in each school subject), and innovation and entrepreneurship (meaning how innovation and entrepreneurship promote visual production in all phases). The implications of the new syllabus based on measurability were that a great deal of the vocabulary on which visual arts thus far has been practiced was absent, for example, aesthetic learning processes, sensory cognition, thematic content, quality of expression, and critical communication, because they are too inexact to measure.

I discuss three parts of the syllabus I consider particularly different from the former syllabus and indicate a new direction for visual arts education that creates a paradox between formal skills referring to modernism and craft skills for utility in a mediated postindustrial society. The three parts are subject-oriented learning objectives and two cross-disciplinary topics (IT and media and innovation and entrepreneurship).

Objectives for Learning Outcomes

The new learning objectives represent measurable competences. The former categories of production, analysis, and communication with subcategories still structure the objectives but were simplified in accordance with the government regulations. The simplification of the learning objectives resulted in an instrumental description of the categories. For instance, spatial construction skills and technical construction knowledge are measurable competences and represent the only objectives for learning outcomes in sculpture and architecture after second grade (Ministry of Education, 2014). This indicates an approach in which mastering a particular technical skill and technical knowledge of that skill constitute visual arts competence. This approach takes the school subject in a new direction from the former visual practices as a craft with a strong reference to a formalist art practice that refers to modernistic standards (cf. Pedersen, 2004 above). The new focus in the learning objectives separates the school subject from the rich visual culture in which children are experienced users as well as participants and co-producers. Aspects of the former common objectives (Ministry of Education, 2009) such as narratives, sensory experiences, emotions, and imagination are left out. The phrase “explore and use diverse spatial material through construction” has been displaced by “can produce a spatial construction” and “have knowledge of techniques for construction.” Furthermore, the new learning objectives do not reflect currents in contemporary art that represent social and conceptual practice. The new learning objectives appear technical and formal. The former learning objectives were based on the relations between expression and the

nature of the subject for expression and engaging with the surrounding society. This relational approach was known in Danish art pedagogical literature as critical constructive art education and was a strong indicator of the quality assurance of art pedagogical activities, goals for students' learning processes, and for the evaluations that were in force until the emergence of the reform.

IT and Media

IT and media is one of the three new cross-disciplinary topics that emerged from the government IT strategy for all segments of Danish society that included the school system. Along with 500 million Danish kroner (€70 million), strategies for implementing digital learning resources and national tests and exams were developed including digital learning objectives. The latter is articulated as this cross-disciplinary topic in all school subjects and followed by development and research projects in selected schools (the demonstration schools). One part of IT and media (the category of digital images) has been part of visual arts education since 1984 and is represented as the subcategory production, analysis, and communication in the new learning objectives. The syllabus has a specific paragraph on the subject. The cross-disciplinary description characterizes IT and media as a tool and channel for communication for students' individual pictorial production and social media as a consuming platform for critical reflection. A formalistic and modernistic approach to digital media originated from former visual arts trends can be identified here.

However, no opportunity is taken to utilize the potential of social media for renewing a visual practice that students have already experienced from their leisure activities as participants and co-producers of visual cultures across geographic and national borders as well as students as ubiquitous practitioners of mobile devices in shifting physical locations. A close connection to everyday experiences might have the potential for facilitating an aesthetic, critical, and ethical practice that explores the opportunities and challenges of IT and media and utilizes new modes of expression.

Innovation and Entrepreneurship

A newcomer in visual arts education is the other cross-disciplinary topic innovation and entrepreneurship. Similar to IT and media, the inclusion of this topic was also the result of the government's national strategy. The Ministry for Science, Innovation and Higher Education (2012) and the Ministry for Business and Growth initiating a paradigm shift for future innovation policy by launching the national innovation strategy, "Denmark – a nation of solutions." The vision was that "Denmark should be a nation of solutions where innovative solutions to great societal challenges are translated into growth and employment" (Ministry for Science, Innovation and Higher Education, 2012, p. 8).

The vision has been implemented in the syllabus for visual arts. One paragraph states that innovation and entrepreneurship are "the prerequisite for pictorial practice in all phases" [my translation] (Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 11). The paragraph also states that "the students must achieve visual action competences by experiencing how their pictorial work through planning, performance and evaluation may be of use for other people" [my translation] (Ministry of Education, 2014). Phrases such as "the needs of the receiver or customer of a particular visual effort" and "the sustainability of a personal visual expression" (Ministry of Education, 2014) are a new hybrid of art terminology and business terminology. The topic is expressed in four dimensions: action, creativity, responsivity to the external world, and personal attitude. Visual communication and the presentation of visual expression are and have been part of the school subject since 1991. However, the incorporation of a customer perspective is new and indicates the revival of the utility perspective common at the origin of the school subject when drawing skills meant skills for craftsmanship and crafts (Ministry of Education, 2014).

The outlined pictorial production meaning a project of ideas and its realization are also well-known from visual art pedagogy. However, the purpose is different. Until now, the purpose has

been explorative to achieve knowledge of the world, to participate in communication about life and life conditions, and to express impression of being a human in complex reality. The utility perspective and the vocational orientation may take the school subject in a new direction (or back to an old) in which skills for business activities displace art activities. My forecast is supported by the simultaneous simplification of visual arts competences into measurable skills and knowledge.

Gains and Losses?

The new syllabus for the school subject reflects the evidence discourse. The picture of the subject's identity becomes unclear. On the one hand, the syllabus responds to the demands for measurement by simplifying a formal version of modern art competences into technical skills. On the other hand, the syllabus responds to societal demands for societal growth by implementing business skills. Does that mean that Danish schooling has excluded visual arts education based on current developments in the field of contemporary visual practices? The vocational approach is further supported in the government agreement that imposes a longer and more varied school day that:

concerns a varied and differentiated ways of learning, challenging strong and weak learners alike, practical and practice oriented teaching methods that can open the school towards the world around it full of knowledge, innovation, entrepreneurship and creativity, enabling the students to transform knowledge into products of value, an supportive learning activities with an aim to develop the students' receptiveness to teaching by working with their social competences, diverse development, motivation and well-being. (Ministry of Education, 2013)

The paragraph could be read as an opportunity to strengthen all school subjects by aiming to strengthen the students' learning capacities. The agreement increases class hours allocated to several subjects, mainly Danish and Math and with the exception of Visual Arts. The aim of the

longer varied school day is “to strengthen academic standards on different form levels, especially Danish and Maths” (Ministry of Education, 2013), which indicates visual art competences should serve other subjects. The agreement emphasizes the following: “The practical subjects /art subjects shall contribute to the academic standards of the other subjects of the public school, especially Danish and Maths” (Ministry of Education, 2013). From an evidence discourse, we already learned that art production have no proven impact on cognitive outcome in other subjects (cf. Winner et al., 2013). This cannot be the case unless the epistemological notion of sensory cognition generated from working with art production is removed from the syllabus and replaced by technical measurable skills, which seems to be the case in the new learning objectives.

Does this mean that visual art has disappeared from Danish education? Probably not. However, the core of the school subject has been removed from the syllabus in favor of a utility agenda. The school reform’s initiatives of opening up schools to the world surrounding them may provide opportunities for students to experience art events outside school, but the long tough haul to educate through art has been displaced by a new hybrid of technical art skills, technology, and entrepreneurship. From that perspective, it is questionable to what extent the new school reform for visual arts education meets the intentions of the Seoul Agenda: Goals for the Development of Arts Education developed at UNESCO’s Second World Conference on Arts Education (2010).

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to examine the current development of visual arts education in Denmark in light of the recent school reforms. The examination revealed that critical components of visual arts were removed in favor of new components: entrepreneurship, innovation, IT, and media. The investigation also revealed an increasing focus on the school subject as a matter of achieving measurable technical skills that leave the practice of other parts of visual arts education to

actors outside school. Finally, the examination revealed that the school subject's legitimization is defined by its utility for other school subjects or external stakeholders.

The school subject visual arts is challenged by the evidence discourse and has two possibilities: It can strive to contribute to improving academic standards, which thus far has been proven impossible according to Winner et al., or it can advocate for the utility of visual activities by serving a vocational agenda of technical skills. Either way, the subject seems to have lost the part that serves the purpose of world knowledge in a broad sense based on the synergy between aesthetic, emotional, cognitive, and social development. What you learn in, about, and through art has become instrumental. Starting another discourse other than evidence will be necessary if other modes of advocacy are to succeed.

References

- Bamford, A., & Qvortrup, M. (2006). *The ildsjæl in the classroom. A review of the Danish arts education in the Folkeskole*. Copenhagen: Danish Art Council. Retrieved from http://www.kunststyrelsen.dk/db/files/the_ildsjael_in_the_classroom.pdf
- Buhl, M. (2002). *Paradoksal billedpædagogik* [Paradoxical visual arts pedagogy]. Copenhagen: Danish University of Education Press.
- Buhl, M. (2005). Visual culture as a strategic approach to art production in education. *International Journal of Education Through Art*, 1(2), 103–114.
- Buhl, M. (2011). So, what comes after? The current state of visual culture and visual education. *Synnyt Origins: Finnish Studies in Art*, 1, 1–7.
- Illeris, H. (2002). *Billede, pædagogik, magt* [Image, pedagogy, power]. Roskilde, Denmark: Samfundslitteratur.
- Ministry of Education. (2009). *Fælles mål* [Common objectives]. . Retrieved from <http://www.uvm.dk/Service/Publikationer/Publikationer/Folkeskolen/2009/Faelles-Maal-2009-Billedkunst/Trinmaal-for-faget-billedkunst-efter-2-klasetrin>
- Ministry of Education. (2012a). *Forsøg med praktiske/musiske fag i Folkeskolen* [Experimental projects with practical arts in the Folkeskole]. Copenhagen: Rambøll. Retrieved from <http://www.uvm.dk/~UVM-DK/Content/News/Udd/Folke/2012/Jan/~media/UVM/Filer/Udd/Folke/PDF12/120113%20Evaluering%20forsoeg%20praktiske%20musiske%20fag.ashx>
- Ministry of Education. (2012b). *Kortlægning af de praktiske/musiske fags vilkår og status i Folkeskolen* [Mapping the conditions and status of practical arts in the Folkeskole]. Copenhagen: Rambøll. Retrieved from

<http://www.uvm.dk/~media/UVM/Filer/Udd/Folke/PDF12/120113%20Kortlaegning%20praktiske%20musiske%20fags%20status%20vilkaar.pdf>

Ministry of Education. (2013). *Agreement between the Danish government (the Social Democrats, the Social Liberal Party and the Socialist People's Party), the Liberal Party of Denmark and the Danish People's Party*. Retrieved from

http://eng.uvm.dk/~media/UVM/Filer/English/PDF/131007%20folkeskolereformaftale_ENG_RED.pdf

Ministry of Education. (2014). *Nye fælles mål. [New common objectives]. Act for reform of the Danish School system*. Retrieved from <http://www.emu.dk/modul/billedkunst-m%C3%A5l-1%C3%A6seplan-og-vejledning>

Ministry of Science, Innovation and Higher Education. (2012). *Denmark – a nation of solutions*.

Retrieved from <http://ufm.dk/en/publications/2012/files-2012/innovation-strategy.pdf>

Pedersen, K. (2004). *Rekonstruktion af billedpædagogikken* [Reconstruction of visual arts pedagogy]. Copenhagen: Danish University of Education Press.

UNESCO. (2006). *Road map for arts education. Building creative capacities for the 21st century*.

Retrieved from [http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-](http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=30335&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)

[URL_ID=30335&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=30335&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)

UNESCO. (2010). *Seoul agenda: Goals for the development of art education*. Retrieved from

http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CLT/CLT/pdf/Seoul_Agenda_EN.pdf

Winner, E., Goldstein, T. R., & Vincent-Lancrin, S. (2013). *Art for art's sake. The impact of arts education*. Centre for Educational Research and Innovation. OECD. Retrieved from

http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oecd/education/art-for-art-s-sake_9789264180789-en#page3