

# **INTERPRETING CIVIC ASPECTS AT SCHOOL CLASS LEVEL IN DENMARK - AN EDUCATIONAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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## **Abstract**

This paper reports a secondary analysis carried out on Danish CivEd data from the upper secondary population. The analysis is of significance to the reported civic international research in two ways. First, by defining the school class as the research unit instead of the individual pupil. Second, by constructing six new attitude scales to describe the classes in ways which relate to the values of modern Danish society i.e., attitudes concerning global orientation, individualistic values, political apathy, tolerance related to minorities and nationalism. An analysis of multivariate correlation carried out on the Danish CivEd data - which represent 141 school classes at the upper secondary level - reveals two completely contrast my groups of classes. One pole, the so-called 'individualistic' one, is characterized by a relatively high degree of individualism and a high degree of protectionism plus a relatively low degree of the following: political engagement, inclusion of civil rights of ethnic minorities, inclusion of civil rights of anti-democratic groups and global orientation. The opposite group of classes, called the 'collectivistic' one, is defined by reversing each of the six elements. This result show that individual pupils are not distributed among classes in a random manner, instead they concentrate in social units formed by many different macro-systemic conditions: type of school, local area, family background, gender distribution. The three levels of results - individual, school class and nation - provide ground for theorizing the results in an educational anthropological perspective.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The globalization processes puts pressure on the culture of national states, and the identity formation processes of the citizens are challenged and transformed, sometimes in ways that seem to threaten the social cohesion of the national society.

Ongoing public debate in Denmark has focused on the conflicts involved in this development. Danes disagree politically about their present and future national community and national identity, a disagreement that has internal as well as external aspects.

Internally there are disagreements over relationships with ethnic minorities: Has Denmark become a multicultural state? Is Danish nationality to be negotiated? Is it necessary to protect the Christian Danish culture? Is there a religious struggle between Christian culture and Islam? Is it right to insist that ethnic minorities must respect and assimilate traditional Danish norms and values? Questions like these are all about the same overarching political issue: must Danish citizens accept changes in the definition of national community and national identity, or can the majority insist that Danish nationality remain stable?

Externally there are disagreements related to international political cooperation: must Danes give up parts of their national sovereignty and pass it over to the European Union or other supranational organizations? Or shall we keep our position as 'masters in our own house'? Not least in relation to the "democratic deficit" of the European Union, Danes hesitate to give up the advantages and legitimacy of a national democracy. It has long been debated whether the national parliament has the sole right to make decisions about the activity of the Danes. Should some of the decisions - and in the future still more of them - be made by the European parliament or perhaps some other organization for international cooperation?

There are differences and contradictions in Danish principles of community and democracy. More recently, discussions in the media have become more sharpened and aggressive. Lately, some neighbour countries have seen that Denmark does not always adhere to its traditional reputation as a nice and peaceful little country.

It is reasonable to suppose that the national Danish CivEd-result does not reflect a social homogeneity, but rather represents an average of differences and contradictions - a population in discussion with itself - a society in development. Therefore, it is important to ask if - and eventually in what ways - these differences and contradictions of the Danish national population are reflected in the upper secondary school system of Denmark.

Against this background we have analyzed a range of items, which were supplemental to the international questionnaire as a national option (further information below), to ascertain whether the political disagreement among Danish citizens also can be located within our population of 18-year-old students. Much debate in Denmark has also focused on the widespread political disinterest among the youth and their growing individualistic approach to life without a sense of solidarity. These phenomena likely contribute to further problems in the social cohesion.

### **Purpose and theoretical perspective**

The data source is the Danish upper secondary study in CivEd, with a total participation of 141 school classes and 2761 students answering the questionnaires. The Danish study has an implicit stratification based on type of school. Four

different types of schools are included, representing different variations of vocational and academic perspectives. In order to conduct this secondary analysis of the Danish CivEd Study upper secondary population, we developed a method of analysis that differs in two ways from the official IEA study.

First, the level of analysis is not the individual student, but the school class. CivEd has its primary focus on the political knowledge, skills and attitudes of individual students and therefore has the problem that democracy is viewed at an individual level. In other words, it does not really take into account that democracy is about collective processes (too), and that social cohesion is not only a question of socialized individuals. The school class is hypothesized to be one of the social frameworks regulating the ways in which the individual relates to society and democracy. Therefore, we have tried to benefit from the fact that the participants in CivEd were selected as entire school classes. As such the class level is the correct level of analysis. Our view of the class is, furthermore, contextual. The class is under influence of the teaching, the type of school, the local environment and so forth.

Second, we have constructed six new attitude-scales. We have chosen to focus on the ways in which the various school classes relate to a number of the already mentioned discussions in Danish society today: globalization, individualization, nationalism, political apathy and ethnic and political tolerance. In order to do this, we developed the six new attitude scales. The six new scales were basically constructed by means of two sets of items. One set derives from the international IEA CivEd questionnaires, but in this case primarily items not included in the international scales of the international report. Another set of items was chosen from a special Danish booklet prepared by us in cooperation with The Nordic Civic Group (research groups of Denmark, Norway, Sweden (main partner in this work), Finland, and Estonia). The scales were established on the basis of research interests and for theoretical reasons - and as such they were not based on factor analysis or other statistical analysis. Furthermore, it was decided that the analysis should focus on the connections between all the scales and look for possible coherent groups of classes. In other words, the scales were not viewed as independent, but as separate parts of a hypothetical ideological pattern.

It should be mentioned that a number of items are excluded from the international comparisons for reasons that are presented as purely technical, but often the real reason seems to be that items have different meanings and significance in different countries - depending on the national circumstances. Therefore such items may be very important for national secondary analysis even though they are not suitable for comparisons in international reports.

## **THE NEW SCALES**

On basis of those considerations, we constructed the following new scales (following the methodology of the IEA technical standards from CivEd).

- 1: Degree of individualistic values versus degree of collectivistic values
- 2: Degree of inclusion of civil rights of ethnic minorities and immigrants

- 3: Degree of inclusion of civil rights of anti-democratic groups
- 4: Degree of political engagement in a wide range of political activities
- 5: Degree of global orientation and solidarity
- 6: Degree of national protectionism (political, economical and cultural protectionism)

## RESULTS

The statistical analysis (Bruun et al., 2003; Allerup, 2004) shows us two distinctive groups of classes, which may be described as in Table 1. The two poles must be seen as *combinations* of the six scales and as such as two distinct profiles of classes. We have chosen the names "Individualistic" and "Collectivistic" because the classes in general differ the most from each other on this scale, but in a sense we might just as well have named them "National" and "Global" or "Politically active" and "Politically passive" (for example) because all of these things go together in the profiles. It is also important, to note that the results specifically point at the *relative* positions of classes to one another. For this reason we have added the words "relatively high" and "relatively low" in the table for the two profiles.

*Table 1: Two Poles of Classes*

<i>Pole 1: Individualistic</i>	<i>Pole 2: Collectivistic</i>
relatively high on individualistic values	relatively high on collectivistic values
relatively high on national protectionism	relatively low on national protectionism
relatively low on political participation	relatively high on political participation
relatively low on inclusion of ethnic groups	relatively high on inclusion of ethnic groups
relatively low on inclusion of anti-democrats	relatively high on inclusion of anti-democrats
relatively low on global solidarity	relatively high on global solidarity

These two profiles seem to represent two quite distinct political ideologies. Regarded as such, the values of the individualistic pole match the general trend of the recent neo-liberal Danish Government with its relatively high degree of national protectionism and focus on the freedom of the individual, whereas the values of the collectivistic pole match the social-democratic/left wing opposition with its relatively lower degree of national protectionism, higher degree of tolerance, solidarity and global orientation. In other words, we find groups of classes with two different and quite traditional political profiles. In itself this may not be a very surprising result, but since one well-known argument in much political debate in Denmark (and elsewhere) is that the traditional political dichotomy "right wing - left wing" is less important in modern value-based politics, it is nevertheless rather important and tells us that the traditional split is still relevant as a description of school classes.

In order to identify further characteristics of those profiles of classes we have looked for information in the data, both information about the classes and information about the social context of the classes. Looking internally at the classes first of all, we find that the distribution of gender is a quite important factor in the two profiles.

Table 2: Amount of Boys in The Classroom

	Individualistic pole		Mixed group		Collectivistic pole		Total
	N	% of column	N	% of column	N	% of column	
= or <30%	5	17,2%	20	24,4%	16	57,1%	41
>30%, <48%	10	34,5%	31	37,8%	10	35,7%	51
= or >48%	14	48,3%	31	37,8%	2	7,1%	47
Total	29	100%	82	100%	28	100%	139

N is the number of classes.

Classes with 48% or more boys are very seldom "collectivistic" (only two cases), whereas classes with 30% or less boys quite seldom are "individualistic" (only five cases). As such, we note that the two poles or political profiles in the adult population are also known to be related to gender, with the female part of the Danish population on average being a bit more "collectivistic" than the male part of the population. Even though this gender aspect is at first glance a remarkable finding it should be noted that the difference between classes certainly is not to be regarded solely as a result of a (biological) gender difference, even though it appears that way. The explanation probably is that the gender factor is related to the four different school types (and the related four types of educational profile), which have very different percentages of boys and girls enrolled. The most academic type of school has far more girls than boys and the technical vocational schools have far more boys than girls. In other words, the gender aspect of the *school culture* is quite different at these four types of schools. Therefore the specific combination of girls and boys in a class also relates to the broader matter of the gender composition of the entire school and the general school culture and educational profile.

Looking at the relationship between type of school and the three groups of classes, we find a surprising result (see Table 3, below).

The individualistic pole consists of 7 low level academic classes, 17 vocational/trade classes and 5 vocational/technical classes. In other word not a single class from the high level academic schools is found here. One might notice that the number of classes in the various groups differs considerably (as they do in reality). Therefore we have included the percentages of the row.

The collectivistic pole consists of 24 classes from the high level academic schools and 4 classes from the low level academic schools. Only 1 class of the vocational trade school type is also included.

Table 3: Type of Upper Secondary School

	<i>Individualistic pole</i>		<i>Mixed group</i>		<i>Collectivistic pole</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>N</i>	<i>% of row</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>% of row</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>% of row</i>	<i>N / %</i>
Academic (high level, 3 year)	0	0,0%	48	66,6%	24	33,3%	72/100%
Academic (low level, 2 year)	7	28,0%	14	56,0%	4	16,0%	25/100%
Vocational (trade)	17	53,1%	14	43,8%	1	3,1%	32/100%
Vocational (technical)	5	41,7%	7	58,3%	0	0,0%	12/100%
Total	29	20,6%	83	58,9%	29	20,6%	141/100%

Thus, we find a very significant difference in which types of schools dominate the two poles of classes. Note especially that 24 of the 29 "collectivistic classes" are from high or low level academic schools and that 22 of 29 individualistic classes are from vocational schools.

The so-called low level academic schools have the most diverse profile. We regard this as a result compatible with the special characteristics of this kind of school. Even though it is an academic school in general, it is in some cases characterized by a quite large number of (older or even adult) students with vocational experiences; in other cases the composition of a class resembles the high level academic schools. Therefore it is not surprising that a small number of classes in this kind of school are found in one pole and an equally small number in the other pole.

The vocational trade schools, in contrast, have the most homogeneous ideological profile, with 53.1% of the classes in the individualistic pole. Even though this kind of school on average has an almost even distribution of girls and boys, the political profile is (relatively) quite neo-liberal, which "goes with the trade" you might say.

Traditionally, these different types of school find their main recruitment from slightly different social layers in society. Even though upper secondary education has almost become mass education in Denmark (roughly speaking 65% of a cohort) we still find that the social background of the students differs quite substantially. This may be illustrated by the traditional IEA indicator of number of books at home (see Table 4).

It is very clear that the collectivistic classes on average are the most literary. 51.7% of this kind of class is placed in the group >200, whereas this is the case for only 6.9% of the individualistic classes. Certainly the difference between these two political profiles is also a matter of the home background values (and social class). However, it is important to note that no classes are from illiterate home environments; nevertheless, the differences are obvious.

Table 4: Books at Home

(Average)	Individualistic pole	Mixed group	Collectivistic pole	Total
50-100 books	5 17,2%	8 9,6%	0 0%	13
101-200 books	22 75,9%	48 57,8%	14 48,3%	84
>200 books	2 6,9%	27 32,5%	15 51,7%	44
Total	29 100%	83 100%	29 100%	141

As another important external factor, we have looked at where the different kinds of classes are located in the various counties of Denmark. This also gives us some important information.

In order to make this rather complex table illustrative for foreigners, we have chosen to show the results for three very different counties, namely the county for Copenhagen (major *city county*), the county for the South of Jutland (southern *rural county* of Denmark on the border with Germany), and a *mixed county* (a county in mid-Denmark with a large provincial town and a number of smaller towns, as well as rural areas and villages in-between).

The distribution of the classes from these quite different counties can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5: Geographical Location of Classes

	Individualistic pole	Mixed group	Collectivistic pole	Total
City county (Copenhagen area)	1 5,0%	10 50%	9 45%	20 100%
Mixed County (Middle part of Denmark)	2 12,5%	10 62,5%	4 25%	16 100%
Rural county (Southern part of Jutland)	4 50%	4 50%	0 0%	8 100%

These results (and similar results for other similar counties) clearly indicate that the individualistic pole is very much a rural phenomena. In a sense this is not surprising since it is a well-known fact that the national identity and national patriotism are relatively important in these areas, and perhaps especially in the southern part of Denmark with its history very much attached to the history of relations between Germany and Denmark.

It is also very clear that the collectivistic pole is very much a city-phenomena. Most likely this is due to the more "global" major city atmosphere, the cultural diversity and less traditional lifestyles.

However, it is worth noting that both individualistic classes and collectivistic classes may be found in almost any Danish county, but the tendency is unmistakable.

All in all, the results show us that the political profile of a class is related to a variety of phenomena. The composition of the class, both in relation to gender and social background, the type of school (type of education) and the geographical placement in Denmark are all important factors. Even though these differences to some degree may be expected, we find it quite surprising that they are so obvious.

### **PERSPECTIVE**

We find that this study may have general interest since the choice of level of analysis has major importance in any study.

Whenever the individual level is chosen as the level of analysis a range of questions emerges. For example, it is often implicitly assumed that the average of the individual level is equal to the collective national level. At least, results at country level are often read and understood in that way. In other words, it is assumed that society has made its impact on the individual and therefore the individual is an expression of society.

This is neither completely wrong, nor completely true. We believe that it is necessary to draw attention to the three levels of analysis, individual level, school class level, county level and national level. The individual students with specific characteristics are not distributed randomly, but are typically found in characteristic units, which are related to either type of school, type of local area, type of family background or similar phenomena. In other words, we find an important cultural level "between" the individual level and the societal level.

Quite often the national result - in national or international surveys - is seen as an expression of a homogeneity rather than as the average of a fundamental heterogeneity. In the public debate, the students will appear to be performing either "good" or "bad" in comparison to other countries.

When measuring more traditional competences and political attitudes - as in CivEd - it is often possible to reveal important cultural differences underneath the surface of the national average result, but too often this kind of secondary analysis is never carried out.

The political attitudes of students are not to be regarded as personal and individual attitudes or as something occurring with equal frequency in the entire population independent of geographical place and socio-cultural circumstances. The results of the class-analysis indicate that political attitudes are closely linked to the collective formation of meaning and attitudes in the cultural setting in general, and not so much a result of the specific class.

However it is a delicate matter to define the ways in which political attitudes are being (re)produced, and most likely this depends to a large degree on the determining factors. Therefore we have chosen to carry out a description of our

classes and not to produce a model. We have found that we are able to define two opposite groups of classes with basically different values, and we have named them individualists and collectivists.

In the individualistic classes the dominating pattern is that the class is relatively nationally patriotic in its basic mono-cultural attitude and often with a relatively weak social background. The school is almost certainly a vocational school and placed in a rural area.

In the collectivistic classes the dominating pattern is a relatively positive attitude towards a multi-cultural society and often with a relatively strong social background. It is most certainly an academic school and located in a big city or larger provincial town.

In other words we find a quite distinct pattern of socio-cultural conditions which are not possible for the teacher to control or shape, but rather may be seen as the conditions to guide the teaching in class.

In the present situation globalization may be seen as an important challenge to the national educational systems, which in many ways have been constructed in a national democratic context, where politics by definition is national politics, and values by definition are national values. However the empowerment of students is enhanced by a much wider horizon today, comprising both multi-cultural aspects and global (universal) aspects – two kinds of supranational development.

The differences we have found between classes may be regarded as positive or negative. It may be seen as positive that schools are different from each other and thereby offer a variety of profiles, giving the individual student a choice and giving the school the possibility of adapting itself to local general values. It may be seen as negative in the sense that the school system does not necessarily enhance the same national values, and for some it may be a problem that the specific lines of education implicitly involve specific values. Naturally, this is to some degree the classic problem of a decentralized versus a centralized school system (the Danish system for years being relatively decentralized) – somehow there needs to be a balance.

In the present situation of globalization this question is becoming even more important, because it is evident that the decentralization – centralization debate no longer only relates to a national debate but to a debate where the school system itself is a part of the globalization. In this situation it is also becoming clear that globalization in itself is a contradictory concept. On one side it is related to cultural diversity and on the other side it is related to free-marked capitalism. The Danish classes seem to adapt to these two aspects in different ways – one basically accepting the economy of capitalism as the way forward and the other looking for national and international solidarity.

## References

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