

# Morning reading for the whole school

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*When the students enter the class room at 8 am. they begin their day with half an hour of silence. Silence in the good, intense way, which signals immersion, practice and contentment. 30 minutes of reading every morning at the start of the school day has meant a great improvement of the reading development amongst Danish students. The outcome is competent and fast readers. Further more the children and young adults maintain their joy of reading and the problem with book droppers is countered. Morning reading is a help to all students: the talented, the weak and the immigrants.*

*Reading, reading improvement, test results*

## Morning reading creates better readers

All students must learn how to read. Reading is the road to experiences, knowledge and education. Reading is also an important element in most subjects in school, and when you need to strengthen the professional knowledge it is crucial to have good reading abilities.

The Danish government has set the goal that 85 percent of every year group must have educated them selves to college level in 2010. Before 2015 this number must have reached 95 percent. This is a very ambitious goal and if it is to be reached, it is necessary to heighten the reading ability of the students in a number of areas. Making more students able to break the reading code is the basis of securing all young adults a qualified education in a global world.

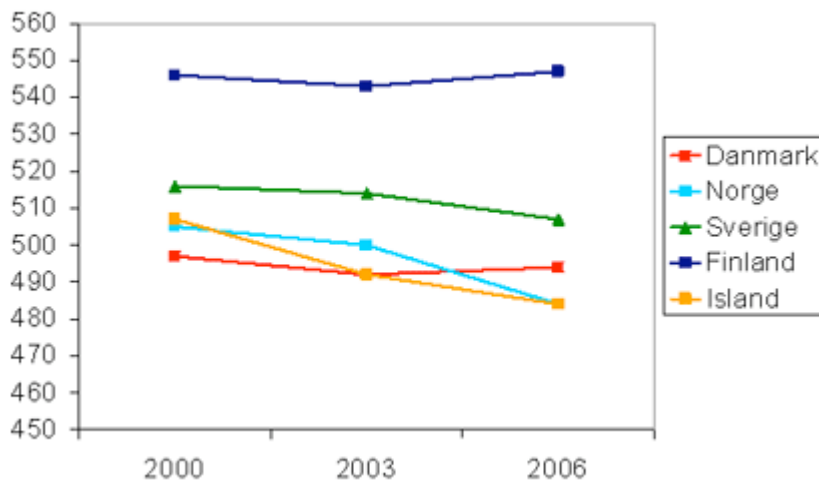
The PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) investigation made by OECD in 2000 and 2003 showed that Denmark was below the average OECD score in reading (number 16 out of 30 countries). Especially children of immigrants scored low on the test. This was very unsatisfying for the Danish school as an institution and a number of projects were initiated. These projects included:

1. Mandatory language screening
2. Inclusion of stage and end goals in all subjects in the evaluation of the students benefit of the education
3. Mandatory test
4. Written notification to all parents

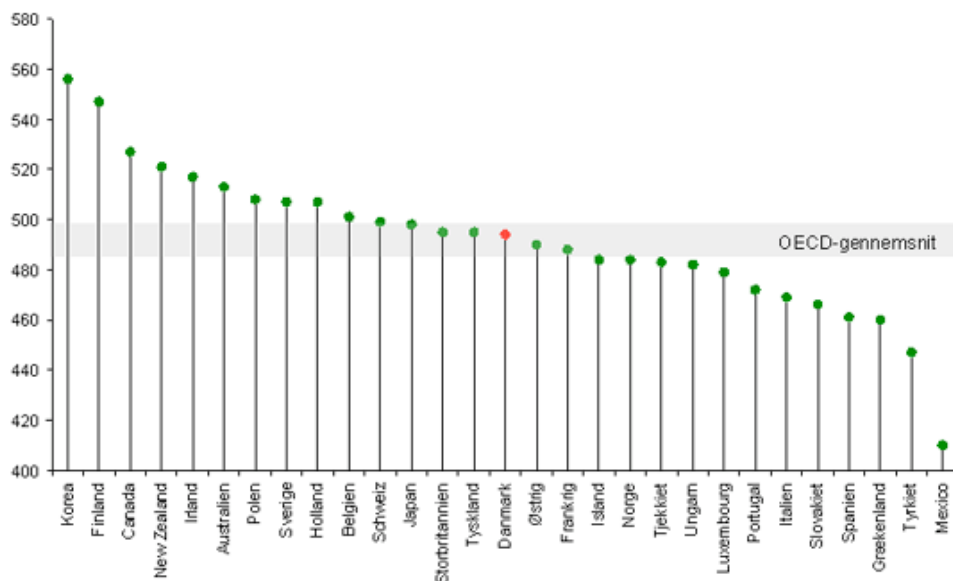
In the PISA investigation of 2006 Denmark had progressed, but there is still work to be done to reach a satisfying result.

One of the challenges we are struggling with is that 16 percent of the young adults in Denmark leave the educational system without a functional reading competence efficient enough for them to be able to finish a higher education.

This figure shows the Scandinavian countries. As always Finland scored very high, while Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Iceland scored medium.



The figure below shows the results for reading in the 30 OECD countries.



All Danish schools work intensively with reading abilities to counter this, because without good readers the goal will not be reached.

In the schools school leaders work with a number of professionals and the school board to solve the task of achieving good reading results in the individual school.

The important points are:

- talented teachers: they should have professional and pedagogical competencies
- a joint focus on reading in all schools in Denmark
- that school leaders help to provide the necessary teaching resources for teachers and students
- a close cooperation with parents about learning how to read
- that teachers and schools share their knowledge with each other and that they inspire and learn from one another

Teachers and school leaders throughout the country have great experiences and examples of best practice as to which methods work and new approaches to how different challenges in the schools can be overcome. The knowledge of how to engage and motivate the students can be found amongst the teachers and school leaders, along with ideas of how to target the work of heightening the educational level and social skills of the individual student.

Best practice and good examples are important resources as it is in the schools and municipalities development, improvement and learning takes place. With the communication of best practice the development in the school is strengthened. There is no final solution on how to improve the quality of the school. Even if high quality is defined as a high professional level it is hard to settle for one solution. A number of factors influence the quality of a single school. This is one of the reasons why it is so hard to document what gives good results in a school, and this makes it even more important to spread best practice and good examples, which are discovered or identified on the schools.

A number of initiatives have been carried out in all Danish schools to improve the process of learning to read. Many interesting ideas will have impact on whether Danish students leave the school as secure and fast readers over the next few years. One of the initiatives that have caused both much attention and good results is morning reading. The idea is that time for reading practice is necessary and that all students must read every day when they get to school and the school day begins.

There is no recipe on how morning reading should be carried out. The schools which choose to use this idea do it in each their separate way to make it compatible with the individual school and conditions.

To become a steady and fast reader you have to read many pages every year. The reading practice must be continuous and the books the students read must be suitable for their level and interests. It is important that the students feel that they become more secure and faster when reading.

All schools which have started a morning reading program report better readers, greater joy of reading and a quieter environment in the school. When the students get to school at 8.00 am, they begin every day with half an hour of silence. Silence in the good intense way, which signals immersion, practice and contentment. All students are in their classrooms with their teacher present. And then they read. In all classrooms, at the same time, after the same recipe every day just added a little spice, but recognizable so the students feel confident with it.

## *Examples*

The schools which work with the morning reading programs wish to make an extra effort in the field of reading to promote the students' desire to read. The following examples will show some of the different ways to conduct a morning reading programme and the results of these efforts. In all cases the schools are regular Danish public schools.

### *Skelund Skole:*

The day starts with what seems to be a game of "Dead Donkey" at Skelund Skole. If you visit the small school at five minutes after eight in the morning, you will experience nothing but silence. In all classrooms and common areas the 129 students are sitting quietly. But it is not a regular game of "Dead Donkey" these students are playing. They are all engaged in reading. Five years ago Skelund Skole chose to focus on the reading competencies of the students. Ever since then the first 30 minutes of every day has been devoted to the quiet world of the books. The youngest students who are not yet able to read will have a book read aloud to them.

School leader John Veggerby says that the students are very motivated for morning reading and that they understand why this is a good idea. 'There are 200 school days in a year, and if the students read 30 minutes every morning it becomes 100 hours of reading practice in a year. It is just like football: the more you practice, the better you get' John Veggerby says.

The extra effort in reading has paid off at Skelund Skole. 'In 1998 we had 17 percent steady and fast readers in the second grade. This school year we have 53 percent, which is more than half' states John Veggerby. The same records show that the school had 44 percent insecure readers in 1998 in the second grade. That number has now been reduced to 13 percent. The students who are experiencing a hard time getting the words to make sense are given help. The school has a computer which scans the text and reads it aloud. The student follows the text on the screen. 'Our efforts in improving the reading abilities of the students show that we are able to lift this task, and we plan to keep developing. We are very happy with our reading developments' says John Veggerby.

The students appreciate this quiet time every morning. President of the student council Simon Kristoffersen from sixth grade says: 'I think it is more exciting to sit alone with your book than having it read aloud. I read horror stories, they are really good. The books have to be exciting.' Three girls in the sixth grade state that the 30 minutes of reading is a nice and relaxing time. Time flies by when they read. School leader John Veggerby gets the last word: 'The reading time is a good start to the day. It creates tranquillity and turns the awareness of the students towards the rest of the school day'.

### *Østre Skole:*

Students have to read a lot to become good readers. Østre Skole has introduced three hours of extra reading every week in fourth, fifth and sixth grade.

To become a skilled reader you have to read 2000 pages. Research has shown that most Danish students barely read 900 pages throughout their school time. To counter this disproportion students in the fourth to sixth grade in Østre Skole now have morning reading

on their schedule. Three mornings a week the students read for 45 minutes. Not till after this is done does their “normal” school day start.

‘The students themselves have established the rules for the morning reading programme. Two pedagogues and a school librarian supervise and aid the students in the six classes, but the classrooms are completely silent. This form of group education frees up resources for the teachers’, states school leader Carl-Aage Lykke Lastrup.

But it is not enough to invest time in the reading project. When 180 students read three hours every week there is a great need for books, which is why the school board has set aside 100.000 DKK (app. 50.000 USD) for the purchase of books for the project. It can be books about horses, cars or Harry Potter. It does not matter what the students read as long as it has their interest. But the reading must not only take place at school. The students should also get good reading habits at home. Twenty minutes of reading has become a routine in many homes.

‘Choose a good book, take it home and read 20 minutes every day while the potatoes are boiling. When we can come to this kind of agreement with students and their parents, the reading abilities of the students are strengthened’, says the school leader.

Broskolen:

Morning reading makes the students remarkably better readers. A great story from the public school: 20 minutes of reading every day has improved the proficiency of reading remarkably for students in Broskolen in Slagelse municipality. Morning reading is part of the regular school day for students from kindergarten till sixth grade. The project was initiated to improve the proficiency in reading for students of the school and there by comply with the continuous challenge the school experienced with students reading abilities.

In all simplicity the idea of the project is that the students read 20 minutes every morning, when they start their school day. For kindergarten students the morning reading consists of the teacher reading a story aloud to them, while the reading for the older students becomes more and more education orientated. After two years of morning reading the school management concludes that the project has caused a great improvement of the reading proficiency of the students.

‘Besides from the fact that the project has improved the reading ability of our students, it has caused a more quiet start to the day for both teachers and students, as the kids are aware that this is how the day begins at our school. They know exactly what is going to happen. This gives peace and tranquillity’, says school leader Marianne Stentebjerg, who was inspired to this project by a Swedish research project, which showed that reading at the same time every day gave the best results. ‘The project has also shown that we use our resources better now because 20 minutes of reading in the morning is far more efficient than 45 minutes in the afternoon’, the school leader continues. For students with reading difficulties the morning reading is used to give them special education, and for students who do not have Danish as their first language the time is used on language education. The project has been extra beneficial for these two groups, as it provides an additional opportunity to read.

Besides from the requirements of evaluation and teaching differentiation to the public schools, there is a raising demand to evaluate and document in the form of the imposition of national tests and student plans. The school uses class reading tests as a tool and a part of the pedagogical evaluation, which makes it possible for the teachers to plan the teaching from the qualifications and potentials of the students. The class reading tests contain a result estimation, which shows how the class and the individual student have achieved the results which have been set for them.

The teachers use this insight in the way of reading and reading developments of the students to provide qualified teaching, and the students on their part also need the insight in their own development and achievement. The class reading tests should not stand alone but be supplemented by evaluation of the students ability to read aloud.

The charts provided below show the results of class reading tests from Broskolen compared to the national results:

#### 1st grade, May 2007

	Steady and fast	Steady and slow	Insecure
National average 2003	56 %	19 %	25 %
Broskolen 2007	60 %	24 %	16 %

The result shows that the school is placed well over the national average in the first grade

#### 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, May 2007

	Steady and fast t	Steady and slow	Insecure
National average 2003	62 %	21 %	17 %
Broskolen 2007	70 %	16 %	14 %

The result shows that the school is placed well over the national average in the second grade

#### 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, May 2007

	Steady and fast	Steady and slow	Insecure
National average 2003	72 %	18 %	10 %
Broskolen 2007	62 %	16 %	22 %

The result shows that the school is placed under the national average in the third grade

4<sup>th</sup> grade, May2007

	Steady and fast	Steady and slow	Insecure
National average 2003	70 %	16 %	14 %
Broskolen 2007	48 %	35 %	17 %

The result shows that the school is placed under the national average in the fourth grade

Two years ago Broskolen started doing morning reading and it looks like especially the students in the first and second grade are benefiting from the project, as their test scores are very good compared to the national average. Leading reading scientists stress the importance of focusing on early acquiring of reading skills. It is a great advantage if the students learn to read early in their lives. It is a positive contribution to not only their future reading skills, but also to their acquisition of other subjects and their personal development. Therefore all schools should make an effort to make as many students as possible steady readers very early in their school time.

All students, or almost all students, can learn to read before they finish the ten years of mandatory school, but this depends on a strong emphasis on prevention of reading problems through an early identification of and effort towards the risk group. Further more it is important with a continuous support for the, in the long run relatively few, students who will have problems reading throughout their school years.

Broskolen has developed a number of recommendations to support the teachers in their work with teaching the students to read:

- Hosting of parent meetings where parents of small children are invited to an orientation of children's reading development, and how the parents can make an early effort to support this.
- Hosting of "hand over" meetings between the school and preschools.
- Linguistic screening in preschool carried out by the schools own speech therapist.
- Development of goals and plans of action for reading.
- Continuous orientation at parent meetings at the school about reading and how the parents can support the reading development of their child.
- Hosting of class reading conferences from kindergarten to fourth grade with participation of the school leader, the Danish teacher, a test teacher, a reading coach and a psychologist.
- Increased collaboration between the normal education unit and the special education unit.

- Focus on reading and possible compensatory education possibilities.
- Increased collaboration between the school library and the special education centre for example in the work with compensatory IT.
- Focus on the fact that development of students reading abilities is the responsibility of all teachers.
- Systematic work with reading understanding strategies.
- Give time and room for daily reading.

Reading is not a skill that is learned once and for all, but an ability which must be maintained and used throughout a lifetime. It is not enough to be able to decode a text; the text must also be understood. Reading education is not solely a responsibility of the Danish teachers, but a common responsibility of all teachers. For this reason it is important to have focus on all grades in the school. The students must learn to read in many different ways depending on the goal of the reading.

It is also important to not only focus on the weak readers, but to create a challenging environment for the good readers too. Reading abilities are developed in the interaction between individual competencies, motivation, the use of reading in the everyday life and the teaching each child is met with. It is a joint challenge to strengthen the reading abilities of children and young adults through a continuous effort on all levels. Of course the most important players in life of the students are their parents, and it is very important to engage them in cooperation about the reading development of their child. It is a shared matter and a joint responsibility to give the students good reading experiences and through these to stimulate their desire to read and their joy in reading.

#### Nørre Felding Skole

In Nørre Felding Skole they are also excited about students reading for 30 minutes every day. The students themselves decide where they want to be while they read: on their chair, in the windowsill, lying in the relaxing corner of the class room or with their best friend in the other class. They clearly enjoy this time to lose themselves in the great books and there is no reluctance.

It is not just leisure time reading being read in this time, it might as well be a novel the whole class is reading for a subject. The students can read aloud to each other in pairs, short fairytales can be written into lines known as reading theatre and they practice reading speed with stop watch and counting of words.

Special for this school is that the students find the LIX number appropriate for their current reading level, combined with reading speed and understanding at a very high level. LIX is short for readability index. It is a scale for determining the readability of a specific text. It is calculated by the average number of words pr. sentence plus the percentage of long words - words of more than six letters. The higher the LIX number, the harder the text. There is a formula to calculate the LIX and a scale with categories for LIX numbers. In theory LIX starts at 1. Most books for children, who are just starting to read themselves have a LIX of 3,5 to 4. The categorized scale of LIX ends at 55 and above, which is categorized as very hard scientific literature on an academic level.



All fiction in the school library is arranged by LIX number and the students quickly learn to find the LIX number in their own private books, which they are allowed to bring to morning reading. The teacher conducts tests during the morning reading sessions, where the students can be tested individually because the rest of the class is reading on their own.

In the school library all literature for younger children is marked with LIX numbers, and this has completely turned the arrangement of the books upside down. All fiction is listed by LIX number from 1 to 29. The students do not search for books by title or subject but by LIX number. This is clearly a library technical challenge, but the students are very self-reliant; they know their own proficiency and read books that are appropriate for their level and which pushes them in the right direction. The only downside experienced by the school librarian is that the students are a little hard to introduce to the rest of the library, including the non-fiction. This makes it very important to also LIX mark the non-fiction.

By working with morning reading the teachers hope to be able to stimulate the desire to read in the students and avoid book droppers. A very interesting point is that especially the weaker students profit from this project. It is not testing which makes a good reader. You learn to read by reading, and this is a great help to the students who are not given much help in reading at home. They are becoming noticeable better readers.

#### Strandgårdskolen

A targeted effort in Ishøj Municipality's day nurseries, pre-schools and schools through the last couple of years is now paying off: The most recent test scores show that the municipality's students in the first and second grade are better readers than the national average. This is a remarkable development compared with the last test three years ago, where the youngest students in Ishøj were not as skilled readers as the national average of their age group. The reason for the good results is that Ishøj Municipality through a number of years has worked specifically with the language in day nurseries, pre-schools and public schools.

The new test result from 2006 shows that 69 percent of all first grade students in the municipality are steady and fast readers. To comparison only 56 percent of all first grade students achieved this in the national average. In second grade 67 percent of the students are steady and fast readers for their age group, while only 62 percent of the national average achieves this result. This means that the municipality has approximately 20 percent more steady and fast readers in the youngest grades than just three years previous. The good results are created by an extensive language testing of all children when they are two and a half years old and when they are five and a half years old to assess their linguistic development.

For three years all students from kindergarten to ninth grade in Strandgårdskolen have had reading time for 20 minutes every day. The teachers of the school work by a detailed reading plan, which secures coherence and development in the students reading process. The school is situated in an area with a great number of immigrants, which has increased the schools attention towards a successful reading process for the students. Each grade has the freedom to place the reading time as they want in the schedule of the day. This can work to ensure that all subjects are used for reading time and not only the Danish lessons.

Even though the children in kindergarten can not read they all sit with their own book. It is very often a picture book, maybe a book they already know, and which they can retell to

them selves by memory – a kind of pretend reading. Typically the small children start out with five minutes of reading time, then 7 minutes, 10 minutes and within a couple of months they also sit for 20 minutes concentrating about “reading”. Weaker students in the first and second grade can be aided with audio books.

The teacher is role model in this project and he or she also sits and reads for 20 minutes. Everyone reads and the whole school is silent.

In the oldest grades it can be necessary to offer the students a little more untraditional reading materials such as magazines, papers and journals. This is fully acceptable, because the most important thing is to keep the students’ desire to read intact.

For the school there is no doubt that it pays off to use the teaching time in this way. ‘We have introduced reading time in all grades because the reading skills of the students were not high enough. Many students tell us that the reading time has caused them to read much more, at school as well as at home. And the results of the investigation speak for them selves: The number of younger students who have become steady and fast readers have increased by almost 40 percent within three years’, says school leader Birgit Andersen.

Morning reading is a great success in Denmark and the prevalence of the idea grows for every year. Some schools have started combining the 20 minutes of reading with 20 minutes of exercise every morning. But that is a whole different matter...

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### *Author notes*

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## Statement of Originality

This statement certifies that the paper above is based upon original research undertaken by the author and that the paper was conceived and written by the author(s) alone and has not been published elsewhere. All information and ideas from others is referenced.