The Cultural Context of Children's Learning and Identity in England, France and Denmark

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Resumen

El artículo analiza resultados de un estudio comparativo europeo efectuado con jóvenes de 12-14 años sobre la influencia de los contextos socio-culturales en su percepción del aprendizaje y en la construcción de su identidad como individuos que aprenden y como personas. Se investigan los nexos que se establecen entre las políticas educativas, las estructuras y organizaciones escolares, las interacciones profesor-estudiante, las actitudes y valores de los grupos de iguales, y las características de los ambientes familiares y comunitarios en el proceso de construcción de la identidad personal de los alumnos. Se analizan las diferentes raíces y prioridades socio-educativas que se establecen en tres países y sus efectos diferenciales sobre la organización de los centros académicos y el aprendizaje: los centros, los profesores, las relaciones profesor-alumno y padres-profesores, y la percepción que tienen los alumnos sobre su proceso de aprendizaje en los centros. El estudio propone elaborar una teoría social del aprendizaje que vincule aspectos socio-históricos (cultura nacional), interpersonales (subcultura de los grupos e iguales) e intra-individuales (biografía personal), que es el objetivo con que se ha llevado a cabo este estudio comparativo.

Abstract

The article will present and discuss findings from a comparative study of 12-14 year old learners across Europe on how the socio-cultural context influences their perceptions of learning and construction of an identity as a learner and as a person. The study considers how the nexus in policy, school organization and structures, in teacher-student interactions, in the attitudes and values encountered from peers, homes and communities create the stage on which the individual pupils engage in the work of constructing their identities. The study is now published in "*A World of Difference? Comparing Learners Across Europe*". Open University Press. November 2003. The article outlines the different educational roots and priorities in the

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three countries and how life and learning consequently was organised very differently in the study schools in the three countries; the school, the class, teacher-pupils and parent-teacher relationships, and then how the pupils themselves experienced and perceived life and learning in school. The article ends by inviting for developing a social theory of learning which links the "socio-historic" (national culture), the interpersonal (peer and sub-cultural groupings) and the "intra-individual"(personal biography), to which we propose to consider these kinds of comparative studies.

As the 21st century dawns, there is mounting evidence that the institution that has served industrial society so well in training, socialising and selecting successive generations of young people to take their place in society is less well-placed to serve the rapidly-developing world of the 21st century. A world, which offers unprecedented opportunities for individuals to make choices about values and about lifestyles. The dawn of the third millennium offers the citizens access to a level of material comfort and a breadth of experience unparalled in any previous era. It also offers unprecedented challenges for the organisation and conduct of education.

The information revolution, coupled with major changes in the labour market, requires traditional institutional structures to become more flexible in order to provide for the development of the skills and attitudes that will be needed if learning is to become sufficiently responsive to these changes. At the same time, the erosion of value-consensus and the growing cultural diversity within industrialised societies is focussing attention on the role of educational institutions as a mechanism of social integration and control.

Many of the children now growing into adolescence and young adulthood around the world are challenging the ethos of an institution which appears to have little relevance to their daily lives and fails to recognise their individual identity and needs.[1] Ruddock and Flutter (2000) suggest that school have changed less in their deep structures in the last 20 or 30 years than young people have changed. For every young person who is successful at school and finds it motivating and rewarding, there are two others for whom, to a greater or lesser extent, the experience of their daily life at school is at best only neutral, made tolerable by the opportunity it offers for contact with friends and 'having a laugh". For a significant minority, school offers a daily reality of failure and the erosion of self-esteem as they struggle to achieve what many perceive to be the arbitrary and unobtainable goals that the system imposes upon them.

The contemporary policy debates of many different national education systems display a dual tension. On the one hand there is evident in all such systems a chronological tension between the past and the present; between

the models of mass educational provision that emerged to serve the novel challenges of the 19th century and the challenge that the increasingly different needs that the 21st century presents. On the other hand, there are the more specific tensions arising from these broader social developments and the particular curriculum content, pedagogy and assessment practices that have evolved as a result of specific national traditions.

Understanding the source and significance of such differences is the central project of comparative education. Comparative research into national education systems has had a long history of seeking to more fully understand the immediate, observable differences between national structures by looking at the historical and cultural settings from which they have sprung. This is increasingly important at a time when national governments can sometimes engage in inappropriate policy-borrowing by seeking answers for one context by importing ideas which have been developed in quite different circumstances. There is relatively little comparative research seeking to understand how a particular cultural context may affect the learning process. This was one of the intentions of a project initiated in 1998 by a European team of researchers in England, France and Denmark.

Education and National Culture[2]

The project named ENCOMPASS *Education and National Culture: a comparative study of attitudes to secondary schooling*, was designed to explore the significance of the cultural context in which learning occurs by examining the perspectives of pupils in three countries – England, France and Denmark — on the purposes of schooling and on themselves as learners. The focus of comparison was not on policies or organizations, differences in teachers' practice or other educational ingredients, which are more traditional fare of comparative educational studies, but on learning itself and the light that a comparison of cultures can throw on it.

Among the key research questions raised by the project were:

1. At the level of national policy discourse in the three countries, what are seen as the main aims of secondary schooling?
2. How are these national policy discourses mediated by institutional structures at the school level such as school organisation and ethos, pastoral care systems, rules and norms of behaviour?
3. How do teachers mediate these agendas to pupils?

4. In the light of all the above, how do children construct an identity as a learner and as a pupil, and what are the main sources of influence on their perspectives on learning, schooling, and academic achievement?

Research Design

The research design included three levels and three phases of data collection.

At *national policy level,* government policy documentation from each country was collected and national policy discourse analysed in order to establish what were seen as the key goals of the secondary education system, the main means of achieving these goals and the major areas of tension.

At *school level* documentation such as prospectuses, policy documents, and school development plans were collected and analysed. Interviews were carried out with headteachers, Year Heads and form tutors or the equivalent in each country. These focused on educational priorities for the children, and on the structures and organisation in place in each school to provide for personal development and support (for example, pastoral care systems and personal and social education) and the understandings which the staff held about the purposes of these.

The *sample of three secondary schools* in each country was matched and selected to be as representative as possible of a socio-economic mix. In these schools all the qualitative data collection, teacher and pupil interviews and classroom observations were carried out. However, for the questionnaire phase of the study which required a sizeable sample, since English comprehensives are considerably larger than comparable schools in France and Denmark,we included additional schools in Denmark and France. In both cases these were drawn from the same areas of 'mixed' socio-economic status.

Data collection at *pupil level* combined quantitative and qualitative approaches and took place in three phases over the two years of the study. In *phase one* approximately 1700 twelve and thirteen year old pupils in their second year of secondary schooling, all of whom were drawn from the sample of schools outlined above, completed questionnaires containing both fixed response and open-ended questions.

In devising any research instrument for cross-cultural comparison, particularly questionnaires, a number of important issues arise. Careful consideration was therefore given to linguistic and conceptual cross-cultural differences in the construction of the questionnaires and in their translation.

Production of both French, English and Danish questionnaires took place simultaneously with national team members present and discussion over meanings; and conceptual equivalence formed an important part of the understanding of the researchers before they went into schools. For example, it quickly became apparent that issues such as education, parental involvement, a "class", selection and assessment had different meanings in Denmark than in either of the England or France.

In *phase two* a sub-sample of 18 'target' children was then selected for further detailed study over the course of the two years of the project, which included individual and group interviews and classroom observation. The 'target' group included equal numbers of boys and girls who were chosen to represent a mix of high, medium, and low achievers from a range of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds.

The 18 pupils in each country were first individually interviewed in-depth about their views of teaching, learning and schooling and then later in groups. Each group interview included one target pupil and four or six friends chosen by the individual target child. These were designed to elicit insights into peer group culture and the relationship of this to children's identity as learners and to school culture (Dubet et al 1996). The aim was also to follow-up insights gained from the analysis of the questionnaires and individual interviews. To extend and validate the findings of the first phase the researchers fed back to the groups some of the findings concerning, what children in their school, their country, and in the other countries had said about their experience of schooling. Selected quotations from children in all three countries were used to stimulate group discussion and were followed up with a series of probes designed to explore meaning and to examine some of the influences on children's perspectives.

In *phase 3* individual follow-up interviews were carried out with the target pupils in order to investigate their options and choices in relation to the next phase of secondary education or employment.

Theoretical orientation

The theoretical orientation of the study is socio-cultural, drawing upon the work of Bruner (1990) and Wertsch (1993). They have in turn drawn on the work of Vygotsky to highlight the important influence of social interaction in the development of higher mental processes through the mediating effect of the tools, signs and patterns of action which are embedded in different cultures.

Table 1. *Examples of pupil quotations used in group interviews*

Good Pupils And Peer Groups
Themes: gender, ethnicity, friendship, social background, success, 'coolness', conformity.

Good pupil
'A good pupil is a little cute blonde girl with a brain which falls out of her mouth when she speaks'.
Prompt: does it make a difference if the pupil is a girl or boy?
Prompt: does what colour you are make a difference?
'A good pupil is a keener – a really clever person – posh – and they do everything proper.'
Prompt: what does it mean to be a 'keener'?
Prompt: does what kind of home you come from make a difference?
'A good pupil is someone who always does good work.'

Peer groups
'A good pupil doesn't get into the wrong crowd.'
Prompt: what does 'getting into the wrong crowd' mean?
Prompt: what does being 'cool' mean?
'You can only be different if you're popular.'

Teachers and assessment
Themes: motivation, self esteem, identity as a learner, concept of 'interesting' lessons.

'Teachers judge pupils too much by their marks.'
Prompt: what effect does getting a bad mark/doing poor work have on you?
Prompt: what effect does getting a good mark/doing good work have on you?
Prompt: what does 'good work' mean?
'Teachers shouldn't make you feel like a loser.'
'I learn best when the teacher makes the lesson interesting and enjoyable.'

To develop a theoretical model with which to structure the diverse dimensions of culture, the following four themes could be mapped on to the different settings:

The first of these concerns the issue of identity and its creation – there is arguably a need to establish the relationship between context and individual action in terms of three planes of analysis – the community/institution, the interpersonal and the personal (Rogoff, 1995, p. 141).

The second theme is more explicitly educational. Building on the core notions of individual identity it recognises the need to construct a rationale for 'meaningful' education in terms of a socio-cultural theory of learning.

The third theme concerns the role of different pedagogic structures and practices – what these represent and how the different ideological and insti-

tutional traditions from which they are derived both represent and reinforce the culturally-specific character of particular institutional and systemic arrangements.

The fourth theme is conceived at the most macro level and provides an analytic structure for the cross-cutting discourses of, for example, marketisation, social inequality, and globalisation as framed within the central question of the perceived purpose of education.

These four analytic themes provide the core structure of the book *A World of Difference? Comparing Learners Across Europe* describing the above comparative project.

In the following I shall concentrate on the socio-cultural context of the creation of an identity as a learner and as person. From a brief outline of the historical, ideological and structural development of formal schooling in the three countries studied, the organisation of life and learning in school in the three involved schools in each country will be outlined before stating how the pupils' themselves experienced life and learning in their schools.

Educational roots and Priorities

Although all three countries are based in what we assume is a common West-European culture, educational traditions and priorities diverge considerably.

England

The education system in England and Wales has grown out of a laissez-faire, liberal tradition which has been associated with voluntarism and local autonomy. It has drawn on a humanistic approach to learning which emphasized spiritual and moral values as well as individualism and early specialisation. It has promoted an individual, child-centred pedagogy which has historically regarded pupils as having individual needs and abilities, requiring different types of schooling and classgroups. Today the focus remains on the individual child and their innate abilities and there is continuing emphasis on the role of education in the economy of the nation.

France

Education in France has, historically, been organised according to the republican ideal. It has been characterised by the values of universality, rationalism and utilitarianism. The State has a duty to ensure a universal education, which provides an equal entitlement for all. It is underpinned by an

integrative notion of citizenship and nationality and based on rationalist tra-
ditions of knowledge, which must promote national values and social soli-
darity. Today the emphasis is on the need for equity and a common expe-
rience which remains central to education's fundamental purpose and is evi-
dent in official discourse

Denmark

Denmark has a strong tradition of communitarianism and a policy of
negotiation, which place less emphasis on professional autonomy and relies
more on a powerful folk tradition of local democracy and social partnership.
It has traditionally seen education as a home and community enterprise in
which individual schools are relatively independent but highly integrated
with, and accountable to, the local community.

There remains today a dual focus on the personal development of indi-
viduals, linked to the need for co-operation and collaboration.

In summary then, all three schooling systems have their origins in the
19th Century. Through the 20th Century they have sought to progressively
enlarge and extend the scope of such provision to ensure free, state educa-
tion for all children between the ages of approximately five and sixteen
years.

Ideologically the structure and operation of the three systems continues
to be moulded by powerful historical and cultural antecedents. The system
in England emphasises morality, individualism, differentiation and early
specialisation, supported by regular external testing. In France, the educa-
tional tradition is encyclopaedic and characterised by such values as univer-
sality, rationalism and equity. In Denmark, by contrast, there is a strong tra-
dition of communitarianism which places an emphasis on local democracy
and social partnership, and the practical application of learning.

Organising Life and Learning

A major area of difference in school environment for English, French
and Danish pupils was the way in which schools in the three countries were
organised with regard to the academic and affective[3] elements of their scho-
oling. In this respect, school organisation was related to a deeper national
understanding of the concept of 'education'. All three countries share a basi-
cally similar understanding of the term which includes firstly a pedagogical

or taught element, secondly an intellectual or cognitive element and thirdly a non-intellectual and non-instructive element. However, a major problem of comparative education is equating concepts and finding mutually acceptable terminology. This is particularly true in the domain of non-intellectual, non-instructive education for which the term 'affective' education is used in England.

The concept Education

In England 'education' encompasses an 'academic' element (a combination of the first and second concepts) and an 'affective' element (the third concept). There is also a strong tradition in the development of the individual and the inclusion of a spiritual domain.

In the French system the following two terms are used which roughly equate to 'academic' and 'affective': *l'instruction* which is the combination of the pedagogical and intellectual concepts and *l'éducation* which refers to the non-instructive and non-intellectual concept of education. However more weight is given to pedagogy in the French pairing of pedagogy and cognition than is the case in the English pairing and less weight is given to the non-intellectual and non-instructive concept in French education.

The Danish conceptual understanding of 'education' is different. The term *undervisning* refers to the pedagogical and didactic aspect of education (which in common with the French concept of education is more encyclopaedic and knowledge-based than it is in England) whilst *dannelse* consists of *both* intellectual learning *and* the non-instructive and non-intellectual concept of education. Academic and affective education is generally not conceived as separate in Denmark.

These conceptual differences are reflected in school organisation:

In France the academic and affective needs of the pupils are dealt with by two separate groups of staff. *La vie scolaire* was concerned with pupils' *éducation* as opposed to their *instruction*. There was a very strong division between the two systems

A child has two lives at school. There's the world of teaching and intellectual learning ("le travail pédagogique, de son instruction"), but there's also the child's general education and learning how to behave ("son éducation et son comportement")

In England the role of the subject teacher and group tutor combined to straddle both the academic and the affective but most often in separate courses.

In Denmark where academic and affective education are seen as an integral part of school life and the curriculum, school organisation was not compartmentalised into two systems. From the level of the school board to the individual teacher affective education in Denmark was seen as an essential part of learning.

School as a Unit

The concept of 'school' as a unit with an individual identity differed in England, France and Denmark. School identity was strongest in England and weakest in France. It could also have been related to the degree to which the schools were related to, and integrated within, a community.

English headteachers gave an impression of strong school community links and a responsibility for pupils which extended beyond the school gates, governed by time and function as well as place, *'We are responsible for our children until they arrive home ... on their way to and from school'*. The wearing of uniform worked both ways, English pupils had some responsibility for the school's reputation and the school took responsibility for pupils whilst they were wearing those uniforms for school purposes.

Relations between the relatively weak unit of the French school (*collège)* and external agencies in the community have traditionally been of minor importance, reflecting the compartmentalisation of French education as a whole, although innovations were taking place in the two *collèges* situated in low socio-economic areas. Responsibility for pupils in all three *collèges* ended abruptly just outside school gates.

Relations between schools and the local community were strong in Denmark. In terms of school responsibility for pupils, Denmark was again somewhere between England and France. As in France responsibility was officially based on the criteria of place and school hours. However in practice responsibility extended beyond these criteria to issues of safety, *'I would stop a pupil on the road from riding their bike in a dangerous way'*; or unsuitable behaviour such as drunkenness, violence and vandalism, *'Of course we can't catch the person if it happens outside school, but we can try to influence them'*. This perhaps reflected the closer relationship which Danish teachers had with the parents of their pupils.

Class as a unit

As pupils spend most of their time at school in class groups this area is fundamental to understanding national differences between pupils' school

experience. The ways in which pupils were organised into classes was, again, strongly linked to national values about the school as a unit and how academic and affective education was organised in each country as well as to national values about education as a whole.

Although the school itself was the main unit of identity in England it was the class group which had this function in France and Denmark. The term 'class' had different significance in the three countries. The concept of class was at its strongest in Denmark, as the Danish class had longitudinal as well as subject stability. *It's the class which holds us together*. The concept of the class was also strong in France where the class had subject stability but only for the duration of one year. The class was a structurally weak concept in England as there was neither longitudinal stability nor for many subjects was there subject stability. The relative structural stability of the class in the three countries had important consequences for social stability and the opportunities for pupils to engage in social networking.

For both pupils and teachers, classrooms represent the 'work face' of school. Classrooms are social and cultural arenas where pupils negotiate with each other and with the teacher, independently, in pairs, in groups and as a whole class. Pupils come into contact, and sometimes conflict, with the values of the national and institutional context in the personified form of their teacher. Pupils also have to relate to the expectations of individual teachers and pupils. Culture in the classroom for the purposes of this study can, therefore, be regarded as 'the forms of behaviour, forms of language, patterns of speech and choice of words, understandings about ways of doing things and not doing things' [Woods 1990:27].

Our observations showed markedly differences in the classroom performances. In the French classrooms, the teacher's had a dominant role, there was an emphasis on the use of rules and precise terminology in learning, a relative lack of private assessment and a public highlighting of individual pupil errors, and finally the use of individual pupils in a whole class learning situation.

The teacher's language was less formal in the English classroom, the teacher played a less dominant role, pupils could choose whether or not to participate and there was evidence of positive assessment.

The pace of learning was even slower in the Danish lessons. Danish pupils were given more responsibility and they were treated as more equal partners in the learning process.

An important difference was found to exist between the three countries in the degree of social networking between pupils that arose. English pupils

were provided with the most opportunities for socialisation due to the diffe-
rent class groupings for different subjects and the possibility for change
within a school year. Some English pupils welcomed the opportunity to
widen their social networks. In comparison, although Danish pupils had
remarkably unshifting and stable class groups, this continuity, combined
with smaller classes and smaller schools, meant there was much less oppor-
tunity for social networking.

Friendship groups were a high priority for English, Danish and French
pupils. In the French context there was little opportunity for friendship
groups to operate during classes, *'In maths we work as a class, the teacher's
quite strict* (i.e. the maths teacher's strong framing did not allow friendship
groups to surface) *it's for things like history that we can be in groups, becau-
se we're allowed to help each other ... we can whisper together'* (i.e. the his-
tory teacher's weaker framing allows a measure of friendship grouping to
function) [boy pupil].

Also the classroom design was found to reflect both the concept of the
'class' in each country and underlying national values about learning.

In Denmark where learning is thought to involve the whole person, the
class group was allocated specific classrooms where pupils spent most of
their day. Pupils regarded the classroom as 'their' space and they were often
required to be responsible for it's cleaning. Danish classroom interiors were
physically adapted to the needs of pupils as people, their comforts and tas-
tes. Easy chairs, coat hooks, hi-fi equipment, drinks, candles in the
Christmas period were part of the classroom interior. Pupil desks and seating
also conformed to a high standard of design. Seating arrangements were
facing the front but in rows or semicircles. The same high standard of design,
and attitude to pupils with needs as people, continued where possible in
school corridors and entrance halls. Pupils were free to come and go betwe-
en the two.

French classrooms were in complete contrast. One of the characteristics
of learning in France is its compartmentalisation. One manifestation of this
compartmentalisation was that French classrooms were strictly geared
towards pupils as pupils. At the time of fieldwork pupils had no home base
classroom or area (although since the 1999 reform *Le Collège des Années
2000* French schools were obliged to provide first year *collège* pupils with a
class home base which included the provision of lockers). French classrooms
were always kept locked. Classroom interiors were designed to be functio-
nal rather than stimulating. Wall displays, where they existed, were kno-
wledge based with little input from pupils. There was a clear separation bet-

ween classrooms, where learning took place, and corridors (which were una-dorned and physically run down in old school buildings or unadorned and clinically clean in new buildings). Corridors had a strictly functional role of access and transfer.

In England, where the compartmentalisation of learning and the view that learning involves the whole person, is somewhere between the two extremes of Denmark and France, classrooms were sometimes adapted to pupils as people and sometimes to pupils as pupils. English tutor groups (class groups who remained together for non key subjects) were associated with a tutor room (the subject classroom of their tutor). This room acted as the English pupils' home base, where they would gather twice a day and to which they often had access during school breaks. Although adapted to the tutor's subject teaching, and thus containing both teacher and pupil wall dis-plays from other classes, there was often a section of wall display given over to notices for the tutor group. Corridors and entrance halls continued the dis-play of pupil learning and pupil achievement beyond the classroom, thus indicating the school as object of identification, where in Denmark in parti-cular the classroom was object of identification.

Teacher pupil relationships

The relationship between teachers and pupils appeared to be of utmost importance to the children/pupils, which we shall see later.

The distance between teacher and pupil was at its greatest in France. There was more inequality between teacher and pupil status in France than in England or Denmark and more formality (pupils used the *vous* form to address teachers, teachers used *tu* to pupils). The non-involvement of tea-chers in France with the affective domain of children's learning led to a rela-tionship which was mainly restricted to the intellectual development of pupils. Furthermore interactions between French teachers and pupils were mainly restricted to the classroom context. The role of the French teacher prioritises subject expertise and pedagogic skill at transferring knowledge to pupils. Knowledge equates with power in the French classroom.

The teacher-pupil relationship was at its least distant and unequal in Denmark where pupils addressed their teachers by their first names. This reflected the more extended relationship between teacher and pupils. The relationship was also extended over time as pupils could remain with the same "class-teacher"[4] for nine or ten years. In comparison with the French context, the teacher-pupil relationship was based more on negotiation than

dominance. Danish teachers treated their pupils with more respect. Interactions were more relaxed and flexible.

English teacher-pupil relationships had more in common with those in the Danish context than in the French. There was more negotiation between teacher and pupils rather than overt dominance. English teachers were more flexible than French teachers. In the same way as English teacher control varied with the task, so did the degree of formality with pupils.

The different national structures within which the teachers worked gave rise to different approaches to teaching and learning, related to the purposes and priorities of the national schooling systems. The French teachers worked within a centrally controlled framework which identified the texts, timing and pedagogical approach to teaching and tended to conform to a model of a teacher which emphasized the academic and intellectual. The Danish teachers, on the other hand, worked within a system, which assumed an holistic approach to teaching and learning and included the personal and social development of pupils. It relied very little on external control and gave teachers and pupils a great deal of pedagogic freedom. For teachers in English schools the academic and affective were also combined but a different schooling structure, which perceived them as separate strands, led to a tension between the two.

Parents and school

A fundamental part of children's life and learning is based on the parents. But the relationship between parents and teachers is regarded very differently in the three countries as a consequence of the different historical development and educational priorities and structuring (Ravn, 2003).

In contrast to parents in England and France, parents in Denmark, characterized by a close relationship between state, civil society and the church, more directly involved with the organization and management of their schools. Parent representatives formed a majority in the school board, the *skolebestyrelse.* Parents were in close contact with what went on in the classroom and a majority would attend up to three parents' meetings a year to discuss the progress of the children, both academically and socially, and were encouraged to involve themselves actively in their children's education. Many class teachers sent home regular newsletters and most class groups elected parent representatives to ensure a good flow of information between the parents in class. The class teacher was someone with whom they had an ongoing relationship, and someone whom they could contact by telephone out of school hours.

Although French parents had representation on the French school board their role was only limited, due to the comparatively weak decision making role of the school board itself and a fundamental separation of state, civil society and the church. Parents' role is in accordance with the Catholic Church to care for their children; the state and the school to provide the necessary education. The role which French parents have in career decisions made about their children is however stronger in France than in England as French parents can and do appeal against teacher decisions.

The role of parents in English school management was limited to elected individual parents on the governing body. In the UK there has traditionally been a dividing line between civil society and the state and liberal, market oriented ideas are prevailing. The degree of representation of such parents was questionable, *'They don't have a mechanism for feeding back and getting information from the parents at large on a week to week and month to month basis'*. English parents could also take part in Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) but these functioned more as a forum for debating issues, fund raising and generally supporting the school rather than having a decision making role in school management. Other involvement of English parents was limited to gaining information about results through reports and at parents' evenings.

From these different social and cultural contexts around children's life and learning in school, no wonder pupils in the involved schools in the three countries have different perceptions of learning and schooling as we shall see in the next.

Pupil Experience of Life and Learning in England, France and Denmark

Let us now see how this socio-cultural context of life in school might have influenced the pupils' experiences and perceptions of life and learning in school. To this end will be used both the pupils' answers to the question-naires as well as our individual and group interviews and observations. By giving a voice to young learners in early secondary education it also moves to highlight the differences between the intended consequences of education policy, the implemented policy and the experienced consequences of the policy, between the intentions of policy-makers and teachers and what pupils actually experience in school and in the classroom**.**

In many respects the differences between the responses of pupils reflec-ted the differences in the aims of the national systems outlined earlier. There

was a stronger emphasis placed on the personal development function of school by pupils in England. 58% of English pupils felt that school teaches you to understand other people's feelings compared with 44% of French pupils and 33% of Danish. By contrast, in Denmark the national emphasis is more on democratic discussion leading to consensus and on encouraging pupils to fit in with the group. Perhaps this is why fewer Danes (45%) felt that school is a place where you learn to obey rules. The findings suggest that group norms are more internalised in Denmark so that there is no apparent need to simply obey an externally imposed disciplinary framework. For French pupils (79%) and English pupils (78%) however, school was seen as a place where there was a high premium on obedience to institutional rules.

As mentioned above the relationship between teachers and pupils is important. There were notable differences between pupils in the three countries in how they perceived the teacher-pupil relationship, markedly reflecting the organisation of teaching and learning and the aims of the national educational policies.

Pupils in France expressed a strong perception of distance between teacher and pupil. There was a strong difference in status relating to a concept of adult (and particularly teacher as the fount of all knowledge) superiority and pupil inferiority. Adults were *'grands'* (teachers were particularly *'grands'* as their role was to form children), children and pupils were *'petits'*:

Un prof c'est plus grand que nous, il nous apprend des trucs.
(Teachers are bigger (more important) than us, they teach us things.)

Pupils used terms like *'esclaves'* slaves, and *'robots'* robots, to describe their role in relation to teachers. There was also a distance between French teacher and pupil in terms of time and social class. Both high and low achieving pupils from middle class and working class backgrounds, of French and ethnic minority parentage thought that many teachers had not changed with the times and did not understand the needs of the new generation. They thought that teachers were out of touch with their lives.

English pupils were less conscious of the difference between teacher and pupil status. In some cases they acknowledged that there was an imbalance of power:

Some teachers think they are higher than you', and there was some awareness of time and social distance

They're still back in the seventies ...

They have to realise there's drink and drugs .. they don't want to believe that's going on, but it is.

But it was not an issue which overtly pre-occupied them. Instead in most cases English pupils were more concerned with negotiating their own individual status with their teachers. Arguably, this type of individual relationship held by pupil and teacher in England is likely to have a greater impact on the pupil's academic performance. The strength of individualisation and differentiation in the English context of education made the teacher pupil relationship more open to negotiation.

Danish pupils, like English pupils, referred to, but did not dwell on, the time distance between teacher and pupils. They were concerned that their teachers be relatively young and up-to-date. As one pupil expressed it *'modern teachers, fairly young teachers who have modern views on teaching and learning'*. However, like English pupils, they were more concerned with their personal relationships with teachers which were independent of institutionalised norms. Relationships between teachers and pupils were open to negotiation and negotiation itself was institutionalised.

Table 2. *Teachers. Please read the statements below about teachers and mark a bubble in each row to show whether you think this applies to: most of your teachers / many of your teachers / only a few of your teachers / hardly any of your teachers.*

	Most / many teachers (%)		
	Denmark	England	France
I believe teachers			
1. are there to help pupils pass exams.	75	71	65
2. are there to help pupils learn.	92	92	84
3. aren't really interested in pupils as people.	33	24	57
4. make all the decisions about what happens in lessons.	71	79	72
5. give challenging work.	66	74	64
6. really want their pupils to do well.	85	79	74
7. live in a different world from their pupils.	49	35	40
8. encourage pupils to say what they think in class.	62	65	47
9. will have a laugh with pupils.	47	43	23
10. make pupils want to work hard.	49	73	39
11. are understanding about pupils' problems and worries	54	45	34
12. give pupils a say in how they learn.	67	36	37
13. are only interested in their own subject.	46	51	51
14. will be helpful if pupils go to them with a problem.	71	64	37
Totals	n = 610	n = 577	n = 444

Table 3. Teachers. *Please read the statements below about teachers and mark a bubble in each row to show whether you think this applies to: most of your teachers / many of your teachers / only a few of your teachers / hardly any of your teachers.*

		Most / many teachers (%)		
		Denmark	England	France
	I believe teachers			
1.	make pupils feel they aren't good enough in their work.	24	25	58
2.	are a good example for their pupils.	52	57	53
3.	are interested in pupils' opinions.	68	61	42
4.	treat all pupils equally.	50	53	48
5.	are more interested in pupils who can do well.	43	48	57
6.	show what they really think and feel.	30	43	29
7.	are interested in building friendly relationships with their pupils.	71	45	49
8.	are respected by pupils.	54	52	47
9.	make pupils feel they can be successful.	72	67	59
10.	like and enjoy their job.	69	61	65
11.	provide good guidance about how you can improve your work.	72	74	58
12.	trust pupils.	63	48	35
13.	do not listen to pupils.	27	23	30
14.	try to make pupils get on well as a group.	80	77	52
15.	spend too much time with pupils who need extra help	36	32	18
Totals		n = 610	n = 577	n = 444

The pupils in the three systems were asked to respond to a series of statements about teachers by indicating the extent to which this applied to 'most of your teachers/many teachers/only a few teachers/hardly any teachers?' *(tables 2 and 3)* Danish pupils were the most likely to see most or many of their teachers as helpful with problems and worries, with building friendly relationships and with building self-esteem. Danish teachers seemed to avoid suggesting that pupils were not good enough in their work. Danish pupils also saw many of their teachers as having trust in pupils. However, they did not feel that their teachers placed emphasis on making pupils want to work hard.

French responses emphasised a relatively difficult experience of school life. In the French pupils' view they had fewer teachers who built up their confidence and self esteem or who were helpful with pupils' problems or worries. Fewer French teachers were interested in their pupils as people or in their opinions, fewer encouraged pupils to say what they thought in class

or were willing to have a laugh with pupils. They saw themselves as having fewer teachers who provided good guidance about how you can improve your work, or who made them want to work hard.

In keeping with the English emphasis on affective education the English pupils were most likely to have teachers who encouraged pupils to say what they think in class and who were interested in pupils as people. Teachers in England were also seen as the most likely to show pupils 'what they really think and feel'. Interestingly English teachers also emerged as the most likely to make pupils want to work hard and to provide good guidance on how pupils could improve their work. In spite of all this English pupils apparently had more teachers who did not enjoy their job!

Attitudes to School and Learning

When a factor analysis was carried out on some of the key attitude questions in the questionnaire the findings above were reflected even more strongly. In relation to pupils feelings about their own school life, English pupils' responses were grouped into only two factors, representing a 'pro-school' and an 'anti-school stance', whereas both Danish and French pupils' responses included a third factor, which we have called 'adult life orientation', suggesting that they saw a specific link between school and their future life as adults. However, these factors accounted for only 38% of the variance in England, whereas the three factors accounted for 52% in France and 53% in Denmark.

In relation to school in general, French pupils' responses displayed a more compartmentalised view of school life that did the English and Danish ones. French pupil responses were either 'instrumentalist' in their response to school (grouping together the instrumental function of school life such as getting a job and qualifications) or socially oriented (seeing school as helping you to understand other people's feelings, learning to co-operate, sort out your life, meet up with friends).

English pupils were 'holistics', reflecting a more holistic and extended view of school life, grouping together both the instrumental and the social functions of school, rather than separating them. Another factor, reflecting a 'personal developmental' function of school also emerged for English pupils, (seeing school as making you aware of your own strengths and weaknesses, helping you to understand feelings, learn to co-operate and to become mature). Danish responses also grouped in a more holistic and extended way like the English. A 'negative orientation' to school also emerged in

France and England, seeing school 'as a place where it is difficult to succe-ed' and 'boring'. These factors accounted for 52% of the variance in France, 48% in England and 44% in Denmark; and as it turned out when looking at gender, boys were significantly less happy with the school.

The role of parents[5]

For various reasons there was no opportunity to contact parents directly in the study. But the pupils were asked "what part do adults at home play in your school-life?"

Also these answers reflected tendentiously the national prioritising and structuring of the relationship between school and home. French parents were less encouraged to be involved in school, and less wanted to interfere in what goes on in school; few turned up to parent teacher evenings. French pupils liked to keep home life and school life separate, and a far greater part of the French pupils felt that they had to be happy at home before you can do well at school (83%, England 55%, Denmark 65%). Danish parents, at the other end, were more inclined to help with school-work, 91% turned up to parent teacher evenings (68% in England, 36% in France) and more Danish pupils felt an interest from their parents. At one point Danish parents in par-ticularly differed from English and French parents. They did not reward their children if they did well at school. This is related to the fact that there has been a tradition of downplaying competition in the name of equality and that there is an implicit belief in pupils finding their way without this.

We also found a sharp contrast in the amount of help pupils could expect from home. Most had parents who wanted their children to succeed at scho-ol, but there were differences in the amount of social and cultural capital the parents themselves possessed and were able to pass on to their children.

Pupil ideas of effective learning and teaching

While the socio-cultural context of the pupils learning evidently had impact on their different experiences and perceptions of life and learning in school, this did not seem to be the case when the pupils were to suggest what good teaching and good teachers are and how they learn best.

When asking for the pupils' ideas of a good teacher, of good teaching and learning, there was considerable agreement among the pupils in England, France and Denmark over what constituted effective teaching and learning.

The first requirement was that pupils should *be active*: *'doing some-thing'* , *'si on faisait que parler et copier sur le cahier personne apprendrait'* If all that happened was (the teacher) talking and us copying it down no-one would learn anything, *'mixing the dry reading stuff with a film and the like .... makes you feel more engaged'* (French pupil). Pupils from the three countries all decried teacher monologues and copying. The second requirement for effective learning was that learning had to *be interesting*. 'Interesting' was defined in the three countries as a lesson which had an element of 'fun' or humour: *'Monsieur Giroud est rigolo tandis que Madame Bonnard .... elle raconte, elle raconte, elle dicte, elle dicte'* - Mr Giroud is funny whereas Mrs Bonnard goes on and on and on, she endlessly dictates.*"It puts you to sleep, it's always blaa blaa blaa. They always seem to go over the same things, with the same monotonous tone of voice. 'He goes on and on .. reads it out'*.

"Interesting" also had to do with being actively involved, and to mix the *dry stuff* with film etc *that makes you more engaged*, a Danish pupil said. Danish pupils appreciated the degree of choice in the content and organisa-tion of their lessons which they had to a much greater extent than the pupils in the study schools in England and France and which helped their learning.

Pupils in all three countries appreciated teachers who, *'have a laugh'*, 'can make a joke', liven it up'. In the event of the teacher not being able to fulfil these conditions it was pupils who provided the interest. As a French girl explained: *'Dans le cours il y a toujours quelqu'un là pour mettre de l'ambiance'* There's always someone in the lesson who'll make it interesting and that role was generally occupied by a boy.

Pupils from the three countries also thought that they learnt more when teachers brought in themes from *contemporary life*.

The majority of all pupils emphasised teachers being *fair and just*, *res-pect the pupils* and are *able to explain things well*.

Thus, in terms of pupils' own perceptions about effective learning there was striking unanimity about the definition of an 'interesting' lesson and a 'good' teacher, despite the national and institutional differences in pupils' school contexts. This to my mind indicates that we might listen much more to the children' and pupils' perception and judgement than we traditionally do when trying to improve and change education and pedagogy.

Creation of Identity

Through a number of casestudies we found that in summary we could say that in the three countries the development of social and pupil learner

identity for our students was different. In France the development of social identity was as far as possible excluded from academic learning. Pupils' sense of themselves as a learner and as a person were developed in association with each other. School and classroom were identified as contexts for identity work of both kinds. In Denmark the development of learning identity was subservient to the development of social identiy. In France a strongly articulated and approved "pupil identity", and in Denmark an equally strongly articulated and approved "social identity" offered models in relation to which individuals reacted with relative degrees of force. In England, although there was an idea of the ideal conformist pupil there was more room for negotiation and thus more uncertainty and variety.

Conclusions

By using a comparative perspective, the project has underlined the importance of problematising what it is to learn as well as what it is to teach, in different countries as well as how pupils may be influenced by the socio-cultural context. It has confirmed the hypotheses which were identified at the outset of the study namely that:

— The policy priorities, institutional arrangements and classroom processes of a national education system are informed by and in turn help to reproduce the deep 'socio-cognitive' and cultural patterning of a particular nation state
— Pupils' developing identities as adolescents and learners are negotiated according to this national cultural patterning which helps to determine both their personal and learning priorities, the balance between these and their expectations of their teachers and themselves as learners
— That despite widespread and growing international forces encouraging convergence, these remain relative superficial in their effect compared to the deep structure of pupil cultural patterning
— That policy-makers need to be sensitive to both the 'constants' and the 'contexts' in pupils' learning identities as revealed by such comparative empirical studies if they are to introduce policies which are to be successful in both raising achievement and the aspiration to learn.

The central lesson from our findings is the need for a social theory of learning which links the "socio-historic" (national culture), the interpersonal

(peer and sub-cultural groupings) and the "intra-individual"(personal biography). As such, the project goes to the heart of the learning process. It challenges us to consider whether the kind of comparative study that we have reported here can form the foundation on which to build a new 'science' of education constructed on the basis of an understanding of the full range of social and psychological factors that influence learning. In the light of the new challenges facing all education systems that we identified earlier in the study [6] such a project is arguably pressing.

Notes

[1] Recent reports suggest that this disaffection is marked even in Japan where pupil conformity and commitment have, until recently, been the envy of many other countries.

[2] The Encompass project team: *Marilyn Osborn, Patricia Broadfoot, Elizabeth McNess, Claire Planel, Pat Triggs*, University of Bristol, *Birte Ravn*, The Danish University of Education – and *Olivier Cousin*, University of Bordeaux II, *Thyge Winther-Jensen*, University of Copenhagen. The study is now published in "*A World of Difference? Comparing Learners Across Europe*". Open University Press. November 2003

[2] 'the aspect of the educational process that is concerned with the feelings, beliefs, attitudes and emotions of students, with their interpersonal relationships and social skills', Lang, Katz, Menezes 1998: 4

[3] A teacher who has the main responsibility for the pupils social and personal (affective) development, who teachers most lessons in class and who co-ordinates the lessons in the particular class.

[4] Ravn, B. (2003)

[5] more explicitly displayed in the book *A World of Difference?*

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