

School Swimming in Denmark

A Survey

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Swimming as a part of physical education is crucial for the ability of children and young people to be safe in and around water. Recent years have seen a worsening of conditions for swimming instruction in primary and lower secondary school in Denmark. In 2009, the Danish newspaper *Berlingske* reported that one out of ten schools did not offer swimming lessons. Thus, there is a need to take a thorough look at the conditions governing swimming activities in the Danish school system. Thomas Skovgaard's article presents results from a three-part study, conducted in 2011-12, of the organization and conditions for swimming in primary and lower secondary school in Denmark. Featured results are based on data collection from all 98 Danish municipalities. As many as 87 responded to the survey – corresponding to an overall response rate of 89 percent. Thus, the results and findings give a representative picture of the conditions for school swimming in Denmark. Focus is specifically on how municipal authorities organize school swimming; to what degree school children and youth are offered swimming as a part of physical education; and who is responsible for the actual teaching. The article also touches upon opportunities and challenges in organizing school swimming through public-voluntary partnerships involving municipal authorities and local swimming clubs – most of them managed by volunteers.

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Introduction

Swimming as a part of physical education is crucial for the ability of children and young people to be safe in and around water. Recent years have seen a worsening of conditions for swimming instruction in primary and lower secondary school in Denmark (Lüders 2009, Thielst 2010, Madsen 2011). This development will most likely have negative consequences for the swimming skills of Danish children and young people – a fact that ought to give pause for thought in a country surrounded on all sides by water and containing a mass of lakes and waterways that act as an invitation to a range of water activities such as bathing, surfing, canoeing and kayaking. Add to this the large number of public swimming pools, open air and private pools and Aqualands, and Denmark can offer a wealth of opportunities for swimming and other water-based activities.

School swimming – current requirements

By law, municipalities in Denmark are obliged to offer swimming as a part of physical education. The aims presented in The Ministry of Children and Education's *Common Goals 2009 – Physical Education (Fælles Mål 2009 – Idræt)* provide a broad framework for how this part of physical education should be realized (Ministry of Children and Education 2009). However, the broadness of *Common Goals* means that there are marked variations in what is offered to pupils – from classroom teaching to instruction in international-sized swimming pools.

Thus, there is a need to take a thorough look at the conditions governing swimming activities in the Danish school system, both in order to underpin discussions among sports professionals about opportunities and challenges relating to water and swimming activities in a school context, and to produce solid and timely information that can support decisions, including political decisions, about the continued development of school swimming.

For reasons such as these this article presents results from a three-part study, conducted in 2011–12, on the organization and conditions for swimming in primary and lower secondary schools in Denmark. Focus is specifically on how municipal authorities organize school swimming; to what degree school children and youth are offered swimming as part of their physical education; and who is responsible for the actual teaching (for further information concerning the study, please see Skovgaard & Lüders 2012, Skovgaard et al. 2012).

Study Design

Results featured in this article are based on data collection from all Danish municipalities (responses given by 87 of 98 municipalities, cf. table 1). Thus, the results and findings give a representative and up-to-date picture of the conditions for school swimming in Denmark. Data was collected using an electronic questionnaire. Targeted respondents were predomi-

nantly municipal employees with access to the internet via their workplace. Therefore, using an internet based questionnaire had no significant impact on overall response rates. The questions and the wording of the material sent out were prepared by the prime investigators (cf. the investigator list in the Acknowledgements section). With the exception of an introductory question, respondents had the possibility to answer or refrain from answering any or all questions. So, respondents had the choice of leaving out answers to a particular item if they were not able or did not wish to state information. As a result, all municipalities have not answered every question (cf. section on *Response rate and representativeness*).

Use of an electronic platform for the questionnaire meant that it was necessary to collect respondents' email addresses. Since respondents were expected to be employed by the municipal administration, contact was made by telephone to all 98 municipalities, which made it possible to identify the employees who had the relevant and necessary knowledge as regards the municipality in question. If the municipality agreed to take part in the study, the opportunity to do so was given via a link sent to a designated email recipient or by delivering answers over the telephone. There was considerable interest in participating in the study. The majority of respondents chose to receive an email with a link to the questionnaire.

Fifteen of 98 municipalities could not deliver in-depth responses. In these municipalities the administration of swimming lessons is delegated to individual schools (called the decentralized model, cf. table 1), and for that reason the municipal contact person were unable to answer a number of questions included in the survey. One way to include these municipalities would be to collect data from all schools in these 15 local government areas. For methodological reasons, this option was ruled out. Gathering information at the individual school level in some municipalities would mean that their responses would not be comparable with those of the remaining municipalities, where schools were not asked questions directly. The group of 15 municipalities form part of the studies' total response batch, but have only contributed with limited information.

In order to increase the response rate and thereby create as representative a base as possible, two reminders were sent out to those municipalities that had chosen to have an email sent with a link to the questionnaire. The first reminder was sent three weeks after municipalities had been contacted, while the second was sent two weeks after the first. The questionnaire was closed for further responses one week after the second reminder. It was judged that further extension of the deadline would not significantly lead to additional responses. Data analyses were carried out using the internet-based system SurveyXact and the statistics program SPSS. Percentages in the following tables are rounded up or down to nearest integer.

Response rate and representativeness

Of 98 municipalities, 87 responded to the survey. The full questionnaire was answered by 72 municipalities. As mentioned, another 15 municipalities made use of of the so-called decentralized organizational model. Eleven municipalities have either not responded to the questionnaire or for some reason submitted an incomplete response (such as illness or

holiday among key staff, cf. table 1). In total the questionnaire achieved a response rate of 89% (responses to questionnaire and notification of use of the decentralized model added together), which is highly satisfactory (cf. table 1).

Table 1 *Overview of response rates for questionnaire*

	Respondents	Percent
Questionnaire completed	72	74%
Questionnaire not completed due to decentralized model	15	15%
No response	11	11%
Total	98	100%

Denmark has three nested governmental tiers – national, regional and local. Table 2 takes a closer look at the representativeness of the study, by showing response rates across the five Danish regions. This summary makes it possible to determine whether municipalities in some regions might be over-represented compared to others. This would provide a less accurate picture of the overall situation.

Table 2 shows that all five regions have a response rate among their municipalities that more or less resembles that for the whole country (89%). North Denmark Region has the lowest response rate (82%), while the highest is to be found in Region Zealand (94%). These figures should be considered taking into account that the number of municipalities in each region differs. This means that a single response have varying impact on the overall response rate for a given region.

Table 2 *Response rate across regions*

	Total share of Danish municipalities	Total share of muni- cipalities responding to survey	Share of municipal- ities within a given region responding to survey
Capital Region of Denmark	30%	30%	90%
Region Zealand	17%	18%	94%
Region of Southern Denmark	23%	22%	86%
Central Denmark Region	19%	20%	90%
North Denmark Region	11%	10%	82%
Total	100%	100%	—

Results

This section presents and discusses selected results of the study. The heading for each of the following tables corresponds to the question as it appears in the applied questionnaire (cf. section on *Study Design*). As mentioned, respondents had the option of skipping a

question if they did not wish or were not able to answer. Those respondents who answered ‘No’ to the first question (*Does your municipality offer all public school pupils swimming instructions in water?*) were not given the remaining questions that form the basis for the following tables. Those respondents who were given the full questionnaire but chose not to answer a particular question are included in the tables via the category ‘no answer’.

Table 3 *Does the municipality offer all public school pupils swimming lessons in water?*

	Respondents	Percent
Yes	63	88%
No	6	8%
Other (e.g. some pupils receive instruction and others do not)	3	4%
Total	72	100%

To a large extent municipalities and individual schools are free to plan, for instance, physical education classes in the way they see fit – as long as the intermediate and final attainment targets of *Common Goals* are adhered to. In relation to swimming, it is stated in *Common Goals* that children after 5th grade should ‘be familiar with recovery and life-saving’ and ‘be familiar with methods for making themselves secure in water’ (Ministry of Education, 2009). It is not specified that pupils are to receive instruction in water.

Table 3 shows that about nine out of ten municipalities offer all public school pupils swimming instruction in water. Stated reasons for not offering children and youth instruction in water is that municipalities have no swimming facilities or that the local schools have opted not to do so.

Table 4 *At which grade(s) do pupils receive swimming instruction?*

	Respondents	Percent
Kindergarten	0	0%
1st grade	1	2%
2nd grade	2	3%
3rd grade	19	29%
4th grade	60	91%
5th grade	43	65%
6th grade	9	14%
7th grade	3	5%
8th grade	1	2%
9th grade	1	2%
10th grade	3	5%
No answer	1	2%
Total	66	—

By far the, largest proportion of Danish school pupils receive swimming instruction in grades 4 and 5 (cf. table 4). This finding is most probably due to the fact that a number of intermediate attainment targets for swimming instruction, stated in *Common Goals*, are

placed at the 5th grade level. Respondents had the option of ticking more than one grade level, which explains why the total percentage (for all grades) in table 4 exceeds 100%.

Table 5 *Who are responsible for swimming instruction?*

	Respondents	Percent
<i>Option A:</i> The regular physical education teacher for each class	9	14%
<i>Option B:</i> Each school has one or more teachers responsible for all swimming lessons	52	79%
<i>Option C:</i> The municipality has one or more teachers responsible for all swimming lessons in public schools	18	27%
No answer	3	5%
Total	66	—

Table 5 highlights the organization of swimming lessons at the municipal level. Again, the percentages add up to more than 100% due to the possibility to tick several response options. The table shows that most schools have one or more physical education teachers specialized in swimming (Option B). About three out of ten municipalities have centrally appointed staff, who carries out swimming activities for all schoolchildren in the municipality (Option C). To a lesser extent it is the class's own physical education teachers who manage also this part of the physical education curriculum (Option A). In some cases the school's central swimming teacher(s) and the class's physical education teacher may be one and the same, which could explain why some respondents have ticked both options.

Table 6 *Is the municipality planning to omit swimming instruction in the coming years – as a part of cost reduction schemes?*

	Respondents	Percent
Yes	5	8%
No	53	80%
Don't know	6	9%
Not answered	2	3%
Total	66	100%

Table 6 shows that eight out of ten municipalities are not, in the near future, considering omitting swimming lessons as an economy measure. This is, however, not the same as saying that cuts will not take place. Respondents were asked to state whether swimming, as a part of physical education, would be closed down entirely – not whether partial retrenchments seem more or less probable. Table 6 also shows that five municipalities are considering leaving out swimming lessons.

Respondents had the opportunity to answer in greater depth, and from their comments it can be seen, for example, that the majority do not wish to make cuts in swimming lessons – despite the fact that the matter has regularly been up for discussion in relation to propos-

als for reducing municipal costs. At the same time, quite a few of these responses indicated that cuts would be made by reducing the number of lessons or the length of standard swimming lessons.

Table 7 *Does the municipality have plans to let swimming clubs or other voluntary associations take on responsibility for school swimming?*

	Respondents	Percent
Yes	2	3.0%
No	54	82%
Don't know	9	14%
No answer	1	2%
Total	66	100%

Table 7 shows that two municipalities have actual plans to let swimming clubs or other voluntary organizations take on responsibility for school swimming. This relatively low figure must be considered in the light of the in-depth comments given by respondents, stating that for the time being, their municipality was not planning to have swim coaches and clubs manage school swimming. The same respondents make it clear that public-voluntary partnerships are worth considering and/or that they already have some form of collaboration with swimming clubs. Other municipalities are in the process of looking into opportunities for collaboration or have previously tried to set up collaboration of this kind, though without it being put into practice. In contrast to this, several municipalities answer that they are happy with arrangements as they are and have no plan to establish collaboration with swimming clubs.

Conclusion

This study charts current conditions for school swimming in Denmark.

Table 3 reveals that close to 90% of municipalities offer swimming lessons in water – which provides a more positive picture of the overall situation than has previously been presented (Ascanius 2009, Madsen 2011, Thielst 2010).

As far as organization goes, table 5 shows that municipalities make use of different models to deliver swimming lessons. The most common model is that a team of teachers is responsible for all swimming lessons at a particular school, but the additional comments show that a number of other models are applied.

School swimming is clearly an area that is under development – in some cases markedly so. The expectation is that the full potential of initiatives such as partnerships between voluntary organizations (e.g. in the form of individual swimming clubs or the Danish Swimming Union) and public bodies (e.g. in the form of individual schools or municipalities) has yet to be realized. Independently of the particular organizational model for school swimming, there is a need to further qualify teachers and administrators involved with a

view to secure swimming instructions that meet modern requirements as regards safety issues, supervision of professional staff, and efficient management.

With an eye to the future, and in times of austerity, it is noteworthy that the great majority of Danish municipalities have no current plans to omit swimming lessons as part of the general efforts to trim also municipal budgets (cf. table 6). Nevertheless, in some municipalities school swimming is in for a turbulent ride. Thus, in a number of local authorities, suggestions are under way to facilitate partial or total cuts in school swimming. In other places the decision has been made to continue as before despite proposals for cuts.

Finally, close to 80% of the respondents state no plans to have swimming clubs or other voluntary organizations take over the area of school swimming. That said, the future might well see conditions for school swimming turned on its head. Overall, Danish municipalities are facing substantial challenges in the area of budgeting and finance. This could, for example, affect funding for maintenance of public swimming pools (Gottwald 2011, Madsen 2011), which will have an impact on conditions for school swimming. Reduced municipal funding could lead to the closure of swimming pools and thereby adversely affect conditions for teaching Danish children and youth to swim and be safe in and around water.

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