
Mogens Jansen: An Interview with a Danish Reading Educator

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Mogens Jansen: An interview with a Danish reading educator

Jansen, president of the Danish Association of Reading Teachers, talks about the positive effects of international cooperation on reading education, the influence of society's demands on curriculum, and the distinctive features and benefits of Danish reading instruction.

Eva Engberg

The Danish Reading Association (Landsforeningen af Laesepaedagoger) is older than IRA?

Some 45 years ago the first reading classes were started in Copenhagen. This meant that suddenly many teachers had to stress the *teaching of reading*—they no longer should teach the children only literature or grammar and so on, but they should teach them to *read*. Often they were also asked to teach older children and young people to read and this situation brought the teachers to start the first “Association of Reading Teachers” in Copenhagen.

Soon the classroom teachers discovered that they could find inspiration for their daily work in this association. After a few years—to be quite precise 2 years before IRA was founded—there were so many reading teachers

and classroom teachers interested in reading who met regularly to discuss professional issues, that it was decided to start a Danish Association of Reading Teachers, the *Landsforeningen af Laesepaedagoger*.

How far beyond the group of reading teachers and specially motivated classroom teachers did this Association reach?

Rather far, in fact. The next group to become interested were the many teachers working with reading groups, later reading clinics, and who now and then were also working in the classrooms assisting the classroom teachers.

At the same time, the awareness of the importance of the elementary teaching of reading became evident within the vocational training of young people and even of adults. Then when in the 1960s the number of children's

libraries and particularly school libraries increased significantly, the Danish *Landsforeningen af Laesepaedagoger* started growing very rapidly; we got to the point where 1 out of 8 potential members in fact was a member of the association.

You have had a certain influence?

The association has had a direct influence through the many courses it has organized and which very quickly became part of a regular program. Another important factor, maybe the most important, is our journal which is nearly as old as the association and which today is published 8 times a year besides a certain number of issues on special themes.

Later on we also took up publishing activities. As an example I can mention the research report on "Reading at the Older Age" which has just been published together with Swedish and Norwegian colleagues. Other reports are prepared in cooperation with official and governmental institutions.

But the *indirect* influence we have had is probably even more important. Results that will never be written down anywhere, but I can tell you that more than one political decision maker has got in touch with us *before* preparing the final form of texts on educational issues to be adopted at the political level. And it is interesting to realize that we have succeeded in keeping good contact with practically all political groups.

What about your own work in this connection?

I usually say that in the beginning I was an ordinary teacher with unusual classes—later on it became the other way round. At that time, the reading classes certainly had a most difficult, but also most interesting clientele, covering all categories from children with severe behaviour disorders as well as severe reading disabilities to the very

intelligent, well adapted children with just as severe reading disabilities. Later on I was in charge of reading clinics as well as ordinary classes and I always used my experience as a reading teacher in the ordinary classes from grade 1 to 9; the special Danish system where one teacher remains with the class for at least 7 and maybe 9 years makes such an approach possible.

I also taught reading to young people and adults at evening courses and even university students. Later on my work as a reading researcher kept the contact with this work.

In which way do you feel you have benefitted from international cooperation?

It is mainly through my work as a reading researcher that I have seen the many possibilities which international cooperation offers: Having seen a movement like "back-to-basics" become so popular in several parts of the world, particularly the English speaking world, it would have been unrealistic not to expect it to also hit the Scandinavian countries, and so it did! But just so much later that we had had the time here in Denmark to prepare a strategy which allowed us to take the sting out of it.

We could tell the public—which generally understood what we were saying—that "If one continues to cut down the amount of time during which the children receive instruction one *has* to expect that sooner or later something will go wrong! We are all afraid that at the end the level will suffer. But can one expect anything else at a moment when children receive less instruction, public funds for libraries are cut, and teacher education is deteriorating?"

The result of our campaign has been that, for children's instruction, education and whole life, a very *positive* situation—broad political support for mother tongue instruction—now exists, and that means support for the

teaching of reading, language instruction, etc. No doubt it would have been impossible for us to turn, for example, the “back-to-basics” movement into a positive direction had we not been aware of the trends abroad before they arrived here.

What can other countries learn from you?

Can they learn something from us? No, honestly, I don't think so. We can stress results at the national level, and if other countries wish to share our experience and think they can adapt it to their own system, then I would be very happy. But to just copy us, that would be impossible.

As an example I can tell you that it is a simple fact that in Denmark more and more people become better and better readers. Look at the table here:

Age groups	% borrowing books at the public library	
	1968	1979
0- 6 years	36%	37%
7-11 years	70%	95%
12-15 years	75%	98%
Adults	40%	48%

From Kühl and Munk (1979) and Forchhammer and Helmer-Petersen (1980) as well as private information collected by the Library Inspection and the National Centre for Educational Material.

This means that we taught practically the whole population to really *use* the libraries.

But this, of course, also has its negative sides. Being a reading retarded person today in a highly technological and text based society like the Danish society, becomes a very severe handicap. It can nearly spoil all your chances, not only in school, but also later on during your whole life – Apart from the fact that it is obviously a personal strain. We have succeeded in building up a society so dependent on

the written word that I don't think people elsewhere imagine this can be possible.

This is not specifically a result of the efforts we made! Certainly not, I would never pretend such a thing! But we no doubt have been part of the wave that brought this situation along. *Our contribution has primarily been that today fewer children than expected are losers.*

Today the decision makers also outside the school and the educational system in general are aware that it is possible to teach more people to read better. They have understood that *everybody* will inevitably meet high requirements for reading achievement both within their vocational training and during their leisure time, that it will be necessary to give a very high priority to reading instruction, and not only in early childhood.

Can you mention one distinctively Danish feature which compared to other countries makes you feel glad?

Yes, and it happened very recently: For the purpose of a wide international survey children were asked why they were reading, and if they liked to read. The Danish answers appeared to be rather different from those of the other countries.

In certain countries and civilisations it was typical that the objective was to get a better social position, or maybe to acquire a better knowledge of the religion, or because the parents, the government, the society expected it. In my country the general answer was “Because it is great fun; because I love to read; because I like it.”

One can object that this is no valid answer to the question “Why do you like to read?” But nevertheless, if a school succeeds in teaching the children to read so that they not only *can* read, but that they read with pleasure and to a large extent *outside school*

(and that is the case, in fact!) well, then I think the result is not bad. *Today 76% of the reading takes place outside the school and it is not part of the homework the children have to do.*

And it is truly a pleasure to realize that this attitude continues far beyond adolescence and even into adult age. Today the reading generation has reached the age of 30, and most of them are still reading.

And the future?

First a very personal comment to the fact that our reading instruction has been a *success* (certainly not a big enough success compared to the requirements of the future, but nevertheless a reasonably acceptable one) a success, yes, *not* because we in the

school emphasize reading to the extreme, but because there is an expectation, a demand for literacy from society itself.

And it is true that reading is important, but not *that* important. There are other things in life.

Mogens Jansen, president of the Danish National Association of Reading Teachers and longtime participant in the International Reading Association, directs the Danish Institute of Education Research in Copenhagen. The interviewer Eva Engberg, herself a Dane, is IRA's European Coordinator and an interpreter with the European Parliament. Engberg lives in Paris, France.

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