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Building the foundations of friendship

How a school in the Danish capital Copenhagen, put friendship and wellbeing centre stage in a new build project which has transformed a school.

By Irena Barker and Murray Hudson

"When we have the final exams the children use the round tables, it signals that we are all in this together," says deputy headteacher Kim Rasmussen, perhaps summing up the overarching culture of learning at Katrinedals Skole in Copenhagen.

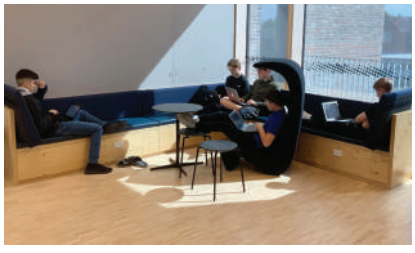
While other schools may have sat students in rows facing the front, cut off from their friends, the 950-pupil grundskole is not afraid to do things differently.

Rasmussen and headteacher Rikke Schultz explain with passion how, when planning the new building to house their lower-secondary section, encouraging well-being, friendships and social interactions took centre stage. This, they believe, is the key to getting great academic results too.

The building, home to teenagers in years 7 to 9, (aged 13 to 15) has been built across two floors. It incorporates classrooms that are of traditional shape and size externally (60sqm) but include

an internal bay and side benching to create more seating choices for students.

These classrooms open on to a large shared space where, during lessons,



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individual students or groups can work in a variety of ways, choosing from comfy sofas, cosy booths or bigger *"huts"* furnished with tables and chairs.

There are even small *"fairy ring"* structures to encourage relaxed collaborative working at floor level, S-shaped "love seats" and an oval space with high wooden walls for *"secret"* meetings and film-viewing.

Display of students' work is also valued, encouraging a sense of ownership of the space and celebrating newly-learned skills.

A number of cabinets containing stuffed animals and skulls in glass cases give a flavour of an old-fashioned museum, while *"found"* items such as broken pottery are on display behind clear glass in the floor.

A central point of the shared space is an open wooden staircase which allows staff to bring students together but also provides a space for students to gather to work in groups. This contrasts with the more traditional design of a closed school hall, closed unless students seek permission first.

Each year group has its own area, although mingling is encouraged and friendships are made across year groups in this way.

Pupils describe competition for the best workspaces between year groups as *"friendly feuds"*.

These physical arrangements support a year-group structure designed with friendships in mind. Each year of 100 pupils is divided into six tutor groups and they have the same tutor for three years.

But when it comes to subject lessons, the classes are re-arranged every four months.

Rasmussen says: *"We do this six times over the three years so they don't consider themselves as belonging to a class but belonging to a year."*

Students, he says, will regularly experience different teachers, all with different styles. This, he says, maximises the chances of a pupils being taught, at least some of the time, by a teacher with a style that suits them.

The re-grouping of students within the classes is also designed to promote friendships and relationships. Rasmussen says: *"Normally you have a class and you have one or two students who don't have any friends really in that class, but maybe in the next class they would find a friendship for life. "Now they are a year unit they mingle between all 100 and find relationships."*

This is backed up by the students themselves who say the structure of classes and the use of space encourage a sense of community and belonging.

Year 9 student Silke says: *"I've got a lot closer to the 7th and the 8th grade by just kind of being here and being able to talk."*

One key feature of the new building is the impressive wooden flooring on the upper level – so impressive, in fact, that shoes cannot be worn.

Footwear is stored in a spacious cloakroom area at the entrance, with large wooden racks.

Although this was initially met with resistance from some teachers (concerned they would become *"the shoe police"*) most have found it has many benefits.

Shultz says: "Noise-levels have improved and the students actually don't have that many conflicts because they are not wearing shoes, they can't run in the same way, they can't be aggressive, it's more relaxed."

In spite of having large open-plan areas and high ceilings, the new building is remarkably quiet, thanks to extensive wood panelling that incorporates a high level of acoustic treatment on the walls. This warm natural look is contrasted with more stark concrete.

When working on the project – which was complete in June 2017 - leaders consulted with pupils and staff on what kind of furniture they would like to see in the new rooms.

While pupils were keen on sofas and

other soft furniture, teachers were not so enthusiastic and a compromise between desks and chairs and more relaxed furnishings was found.

Round desks, installed in several rooms, turned out to be a big hit, despite some teachers fearing they would not be able to command pupils' attention as much as with traditional desks.

The new building is part of an overhaul of the whole school site.

The original school building, dating from the 1930s, was refurbished in 2010 and now houses years 0 to 6.

This original building retains the more traditional design of corridors and classrooms around a main central aula (hall), but the refurbishment has enhanced the balcony overlooking this, which now has a swelling wooden *"belly"* – reminiscent of the side of a vast boat.

As in the upper school building, students also work independently outside of their classrooms. Some study independently on stools, chairs and tables, while others use their laptops on the floor.

The balcony allows pupils and staff to have a bird's eye view of the large open space below. This is used both as a library and study area, but also as a performance space.

The day we visit, a rock band is practising, but pupils working on maths problems seem untroubled by the twangs and drumming rising from below.

Another key element of the school's recent evolution has been to open it up more widely to the community.

There are now impressive sports and after-school facilities, and a new music suite which allows audiences to enjoy performances in the new building too.

But this transformation of an historic single-block school into a campus open to the community has not been without its challenges for the staff involved.

Each year group has its own area, although mingling is encouraged and friendships are made across year groups.

One of the trickiest things for school leaders was convincing the teachers to support their plans for furnishing the classrooms, which now offer a range of seating options including window seats.

Shultz says she wanted to provoke a change in the culture of the school through the design of the spaces: "We deliberately made sure there isn't a table and a chair for everyone in each classroom.

"Because if there was, the teachers might not allow them to sit in the softer furniture, we wanted to push teachers out of their comfort zone."

The specialist areas, too, have been very deliberately situated and designed too. The food technology studio, for example, is smaller in its practical area than in many schools but it is directly connected to an open food eating space.

This means it is used more extensively and promotes more student engagement around food and preparation.

In keeping with the culture of togetherness, students help each day to prepare the food that goes out to students and staff.

In the planning of the building, encouraging well-being, friendships and social interactions took centre stage.

Overall, staff have been delighted with their new building and students are engaged, motivated and proud of their school as a community for learning.

And planners at Copenhagen municipality are looking to them for inspiration.

The city's population is growing at a rate of 10,000 new inhabitants a year and they predict they will need the equivalent to one new school a year to keep up with demand for places.

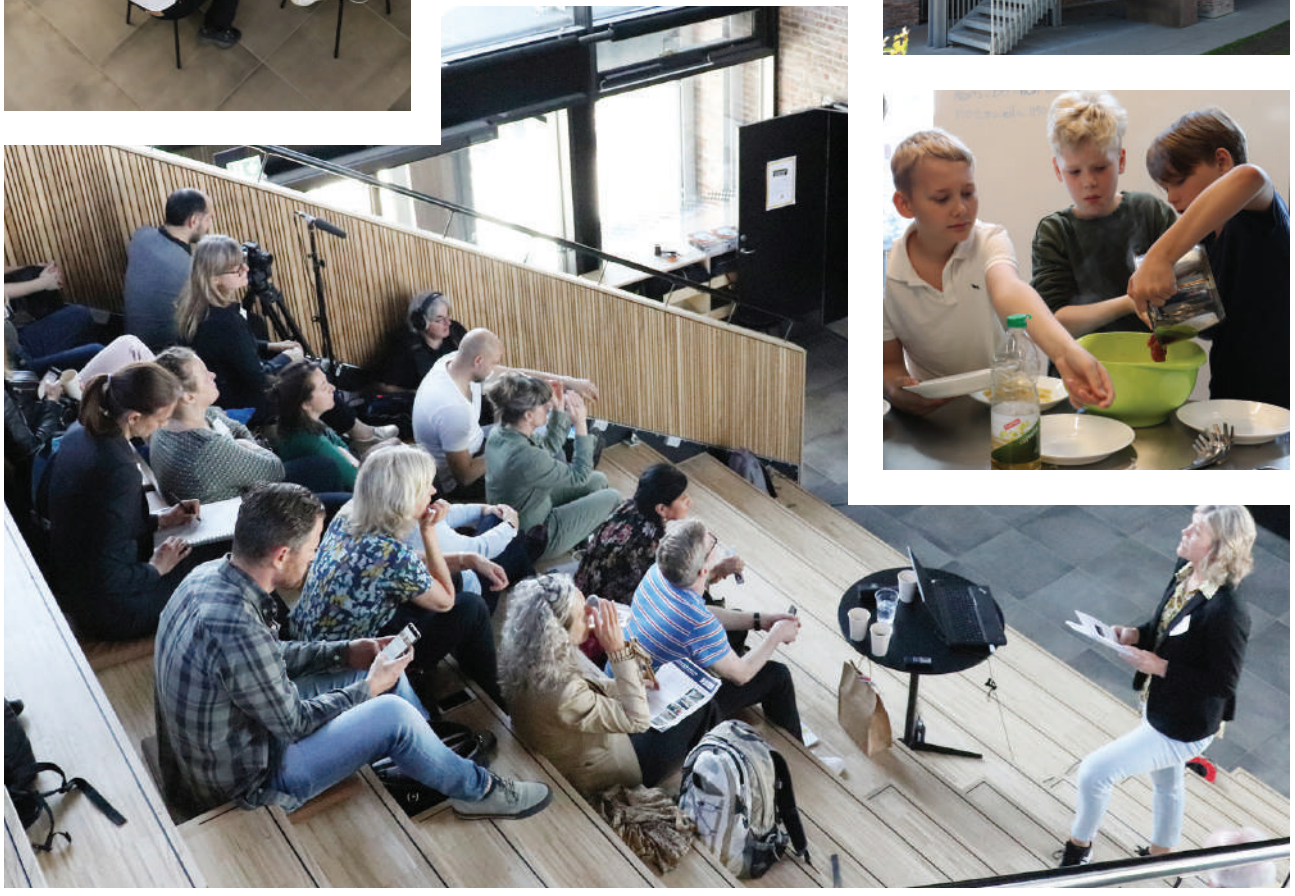
The council is hoping to build six new schools and expand several others in the coming years.

Mette Rose Eriksen, chief consultant on the construction team for the children and youth administration, said: *"We want to strike a balance between our pedagogical vision – we want to build the best schools – combined with economical perspective."*

She said the municipality is working to ensure new schools are built around the UN sustainable development goals and are flexible enough to meet changing needs.

One of the key challenges though, she said, was changing the "traditional culture of how a school should be."

When we visited, this was something Katrinedals Skole has clearly already achieved.

While many schools would agree that the promotion of student relationships and independent learning are a good thing, their premises can conspire against them.

At Katrinedals, these things are built in.