

## Denmark Good Practice Guide: Teaching bridge to youth in schools and clubs

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### Introduction

This 'Good Practice Guide' covers the case study of the Danish organisation Skolebridge. Skolebridge exists to further bridge education in schools and communities, provides taster workshops and lessons in a school environment, and develops a standardised set of resources for teachers, helpers, and bridge organisations to use. This Good Practice Guide summarises the teaching programme and recommendations for other National Bridge Organisations to use in their own teaching practices. There are areas for expansion and improvement for the Skolebridge programme which the organisation itself has identified.

Whilst this Good Practice Guide is not a prescriptive guide on how to run a bridge teaching programme for young people, it offers some key insights into how youth bridge teaching can work and how the networks of any National Bridge Organisation can be used to its own advantage through a Skolebridge-type model.

### Relevant Literature

The research around bridge has improved in recent years thanks to the efforts of Bridge: A MindSport for All (BAMSA). Snellgrove and Punch (2020), in a paper to the European Bridge League (EBL) refers to framing bridge to youth as "just one part of what young people do when they get together". This implies that bridge can serve as a way to connect young people and bring them together around a shared activity.

Bridge is also useful for improving emotional literacy and social communication. Punch and Russell (2002) discuss how emotions form part of the bridge playing experience. It is managing the positive and negative emotions and working as a partnership that leads to "mutual benefits for players". In this Good Practice Guide, Skolebridge and its organising members similarly find that emotional literacy and social communication are key benefits of bridge for pupils in schools and that developing this literacy at the bridge table helps in their school life and personal life.

As one of the countries in the world higher up on the Happiness Indices (Number 1 on the World Happiness Report 2013), there are a few key values that make Denmark an excellent place to launch a youth bridge programme:

1. Trust in each other
2. Security for those less well off
3. Wealth comparisons with each other
4. Freedom and control of their own lives
5. Autonomous work and high-quality jobs
6. Democracy with high participation levels and low corruption levels
7. Participation in voluntary work and social cohesion
8. Work-life balance (The Happiness Research Institute, 2014)

As this Good Practice Guide shows, the use of volunteers and Danish cultural factors, such as social cohesion and mutual trust, makes Skolebridge effective. Thus, the Skolebridge programme may not work everywhere as the social and societal conditions in Denmark facilitate this model.

## Methods

This study took place during August 2024 in Denmark. It involved four days of ethnographic-style research including participant observation and semi-structured interviews. A meeting with the Copenhagen Youth Club was observed and interviews conducted with its adult organisers. A high school visit in Jutland and a gymnasium visit in Svendborg enabled observations of teaching practices, as well as further discussions with Morten Bilde (leader of Skolebridge).

The high school lesson observed took place in a classroom with 20 children aged 13-14 years and 5 adults in attendance. The gymnasium lesson observed included 16 learners and 6 adults in attendance. This study took place to gauge more of the benefits of the Skolebridge programme, its practical uses and applications for teaching bridge to youth in schools, and to reflect on the challenges facing youth bridge efforts in education.

## Key Findings

### 1. Videos and teaching structure is excellent, and works to get the main points of the lesson across by non-specialist teachers

The Skolebridge programme consists of 24 pre-recorded videos and hand records containing pre-dealt hands. The programme is split into 2 years; each year containing 12 lessons or videos. The shortness of the course allows for the Skolebridge course to run in 3 months within a school which may either conclude after 12 lessons or continue with some casual play and reinforcement of the lessons from the year. In the first year, the basics of cardplay and bidding are covered whilst the second year looks at adding conventions (Stayman/Blackwood) to the repertoire.<sup>1</sup> In Skolebridge, there is less emphasis on bidding and system compared with playing cards and having fun.

*For the kids, It's [bridge] new to them. It's just as new as any other [activity]. I think they try so we have to make [bridge] interesting and we have to make them understand why it's fun to stay in the game. (Bridge Teacher 1)*

The videos used in Skolebridge are pre-recorded and commentated by Dennis Bilde (international bridge player). The use of videos to improve educational outcomes link to improved cognitive load by focusing on one element of bridge per lesson and reinforcing this element all lesson. Furthermore, content is better delivered by having a standardised explanation rather than different teachers 'going off piste'. Videos also allow for flipped learning where non-bridge teachers can play the videos to learn about bridge techniques and what to provide for future lessons (Brame 2016).

*It's a very diverse Introduction to bridge and, in all, we have 24 lessons which is the same thing that we're doing: Instructional video, playing cards, and asking questions in a quiz. After they do the quiz, prizes in the form of chocolate. (Bridge Teacher 2)*

The format of a Skolebridge lesson consists of a 2-5 minute video and brief explanation by the teacher and then pupils play between 2-4 boards on the video's theme. The use of the video makes sure that no distracting information or anecdotes are presented that may confuse pupils, and any seductive detail (Sundaratajan & Adesope 2020) removed to allow for a more concise and understandable lesson.

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<sup>1</sup> Lesson plans can be found here: <https://skolebridge.dk/materiale/>

*During the play, one helper per table guides the table through playing the board, giving simple feedback once a board is concluded, and ensuring the table are having fun whilst playing. (Observation)*

There is a more relaxed atmosphere in a Skolebridge lesson, with understanding that young people will become tired and distracted as the day progresses. This is why Skolebridge is taught in the morning, as this is where children are not as tired and can therefore concentrate on more complex topics such as bridge for a longer period of time compared to the afternoon. Lessons are typically taught in curriculum time, either in enrichment classes or mathematics classes. Links to the schools are usually made through the maths department or through the school leadership team.

To summarise, a set of videos and deals are used as part of a Skolebridge lesson. One person (the teacher) plays the video and briefly explains the concept, then students play 2-4 boards at a table with a helper present to guide them. The introduction lessons used are typically 2 hours a time to cover lessons 1 and 2, and another 2 hours the following week to cover lessons 3 and 4. After a set of 12 lessons (4-lesson introductory sessions and 8 one-hour lessons each week), the bridge lessons may either end with the 12<sup>th</sup> lesson or schools may continue to have Skolebridge in for a few extra weeks for casual bridge playing sessions in lesson time to consolidate the learning for the year. It is typical that the whole class plays.

#### **MAIN POINTS FOR LOCAL ORGANISATIONS:**

- A. Find a structured and planned teaching programme that can be disseminated to non-expert teachers
- B. Keep lessons brief and with 1-2 teaching points per lessons.
- C. Remove any seductive detail from lessons and keep to the theme of the lesson.
- D. Use 12 lessons maximum per year to allow for more sociable play and embedding of the bridge knowledge learnt in the year.

#### **2. Everyone in this youth program is a volunteer, and helpers are strategically used in lessons**

The Skolebridge programme relies solely on volunteers to run its programme. Whilst other National Bridge Organisations use paid teachers, Skolebridge has found that offering monetary incentives detracts from the community responsibility element and entails too much organisation and planning for a few individuals to process the financial compensation. Instead, teachers and helpers are community volunteers from the local bridge club. It is expected that members of the local bridge community would help in a school teaching activity once a week as part of their bridge club membership and volunteering in Danish society.

*[Blakset Bridge Club is] where people make a living of running a bridge club, the other clubs are run by volunteers. This club here is run by volunteers. (Bridge Teacher 1)*

*It's volunteers, so we cannot force any adults or any children to play. But every bridge player has the responsibility to participate in the tournament with a child. It doesn't have to be their own child or their grandchild, it could be the neighbour's child, but you will find the child to play with. (Bridge Teacher 3)*

As mentioned, helpers are a core component of a successful Skolebridge lesson; helpers are friendly, enthusiastic, and allow for mistakes to be made. It is less important that children are being perfect at the bridge table and making the maximum number of tricks; rather, children have fun and play the cards with a couple of comments at the end for feedback. Whilst observing one Skolebridge lesson in Jutland, some children ruffed their own trick, discarded winning cards, and failed to make 'fool-

proof' contracts – these errors are not pointed out to allow children to enjoy the session. Everyone at the table (volunteers included) were having fun and socialising. There are a wide range of intergenerational benefits to bridge including social communication and teaching of societal norms (e.g. trust/respect) which were observed in the lesson. Teachers and helpers were pleased to help, in part to further bridge but also to give back to the local community. Organisers of the Copenhagen Youth Club found it important to teach crucial skills alongside teaching bridge, such as communication.

*Concentration is important because we're living in a time [where] kids are very influenced by iPhones, iPads, and all these things. We need to establish something that is interesting, offline, for which children need to concentrate [and] be creative, and which is social. I think it's very important. (Bridge Teacher 4)*

#### **MAIN POINTS FOR LOCAL ORGANISATIONS:**

- A. Recruit a team of volunteers from local bridge clubs, either at a national or regional level
- B. Emphasise the importance of community and volunteer work as part of a bridge club membership
- C. Allow youth players and children to make mistakes during a lesson; as long as the basic rules of bridge are followed (such as following suit) and everyone at the table is having fun

#### **3. Retention is good when bridge is used as part of a community social activity**

As part of the Copenhagen Youth Bridge efforts, a positive retention rate for youth bridge is seen when it is used as a social activity. For example, in recent times, six families in Copenhagen meet at one member's home per fortnight for food, family time, and casual bridge playing. They all started learning at the Copenhagen Youth Bridge club and from school classes. Adults and children alike comment on the positive impact that these social activities have on their work-life balance and that families prefer to play bridge as a social community activity instead of playing for competitive prestige or self-improvement. As a 'happy society', the Danes prefer family time and community, so bridge is a common factor that brings families together for social time as well as playing bridge.

In some National Bridge Organisations, the focus is to teach youth players bridge and then to keep the focus on improving bridge performance through training sessions and youth camps. In Copenhagen, the Copenhagen Youth Club continue the lessons taught in school with a weekly social bridge club for youth players to play with each other. The focus in this local youth club is on play and enjoyment rather than competition and learning. The sessions typically last from 4pm until late, and the families self-police good manners and etiquette as part of their bridge session.

*We are a group of people who meet and what binds us together is that we have kids that play bridge. We have six families, and we take we take turns hosting it. We meet around 6 o'clock in the evening, have dinner, and then we play [bridge], both the kids play and the adults play. (Bridge Teacher 4)*

#### **MAIN POINTS FOR LOCAL ORGANISATIONS:**

- A. Find time for social play with youth players in the yearly calendar
- B. Refocus on providing social opportunities for all players rather than bridge-specific training opportunities for some higher-level players
- C. Introduce and emphasise family bridge nights, having local community players socialise and share good food and company, whilst also providing time for casual and social bridge
- D. Cultivate either in-family bridge partnerships or cross-family bridge partnerships

#### **4. Sessions are planned strategically with maths teachers in schools, and programmes usually run for 3-4 months**

For a Skolebridge programme to run in a school, the local and regional bridge community meet to work out which schools to target in the area. Ideally, grades 6 and 7 (12-14 year olds) are chosen as there is less emphasis on exams and more freedom within the curriculum framework to allow for such activities to take place.

*When I'm finished teaching them, they want us to come back to school to teach every year. At the same class, the same grade, because we usually start with the sixth grade. (Bridge Teacher 2)*

The maths department is typically contacted, as there are anecdotal links between mathematics and bridge through numeracy, probability, and problem-solving. Two sets of 2-hour bridge taster sessions are provided to schools, which cover the first four lessons of the Skolebridge programme; this typically lasts three to four hours over one to two sessions. These lessons cover basic cardplay, basic bidding, and an introduction to the bridge scoring system. The sessions are taught by an external volunteer bridge teacher.

*I actually taught a class bridge for a year and afterwards all students were better at maths. Some of them had a bit of difficulty in maths and then they say, "Oh no, bridge is not for us". I just said "You don't have to be good at maths to learn to play" but afterwards you see that you were getting better in maths. The students got one or two grades higher. It's developing the mathematical skill and the cooperation between the partners and the opponents. (Bridge Teacher 2)*

Once these sessions are complete, schools are offered an additional 8-week programme for more bridge teaching sessions. Teachers enjoyed children being disconnected from devices, improving social communication and behaviour, and better community interaction because of the Skolebridge sessions.

In a year, the Skolebridge programme would typically run for 3-4 months. This includes 2 weeks at the start for the taster session, 8 weeks of lessons, and then a further 2-6 weeks of play to embed the learning for the year. As bridge is typically seen as a winter activity, children would select another sporting activity for the summer months. It is hoped that in future years, the Skolebridge programme will return to the school and teach the same grade and a new set of students. There are plans to continue with the previous students in a new grade, though those plans are ongoing.

*Efforts are good, and I think that the next step is to have clubs at the school... There are plenty of volunteers that don't yet know that they are supposed to make a club at the School. I think that it's better to keep the youngsters playing, doing the club at the school and that could be 5-10 schools in the Copenhagen area. (Bridge Teacher 3)*

#### **MAIN POINTS FOR LOCAL ORGANISATIONS:**

- A. Approach schools via the maths department or enrichment department
- B. Make the most of a school's enrichment programme. This could be after-school or an in-school session during the day
- C. Work on a 1-2 year programme within the school. Keeping current bridge players engaged in the school is key

- D. Focus on bridge as a winter activity to complement other sporting activities in a school's portfolio

**Discussion:**

**1. Introductory bridge sessions need more precise targeting, as some were conducted without anticipated interest or participation from potential new players.**

Given a successful schools programme, with a purpose-built curriculum and resources, it should be expected that the continuation for bridge is high. However, the school-based sessions do not lead to retained youth players and this requires further research. With a poor retention rate, it is a challenge for Skolebridge to find ways of retaining youth players to continue playing in schools and other social areas. The fortnightly Copenhagen family meetups are a great way to combine Danish socialisation and community-building with bridge. However, more efforts are needed to keep youth players playing bridge as young adults rather than returning to the game 40 years later.

One session in Svendbourg attended as part of the research had a perceived uptake rate of zero amongst the adults at the session. Instead, this session was used as 'exposure' in the hope that the schoolteachers would take this back into their local schools and arrange some taster sessions. Fortunately, some teachers at this event agreed to continue to learn bridge as an adult group, but only if the session was run at the local school instead of a bridge club. This raises a key issue that bridge lessons and socialisation should happen in a place learners are familiar with such as their school, classroom, or workplace. This keeps retention as venue and travel are convenient and not an unknown quantity.

**2. Retention of previous year students needed, as most school sessions target the same year group**

In Copenhagen, the school sessions mainly target one grade, and the lessons are repeated to new students in that same grade each year. There are opportunities for retention by covering another year of bridge teaching with the same students one grade higher or involving peer mentoring by making the previous year's students into the helpers for the new class.

This could involve a 'capstone' event such as an inter-schools competition, a 'jamboree'-style event where schools meet up and play bridge socially, or a social summer camp where children play bridge alongside other outdoor activities. The social sessions in Copenhagen may be a good starting point for this, as family members that play bridge are more likely to support their child's efforts with bridge. This can involve social activities, meals together, and community events that have a side-focus on bridge rather than being the central focus.

**3. Balance of bridge and other commitments for youth - how many lessons are enough before young people can play without need for additional lessons?**

It is clear through the interviews with adults and young people that youth players have a lot of demands on their time. Alongside full-time education, they also have competitive sporting activities at a local and regional level, socialising with friends, and learning to orient an increasingly complex and inter-connected world. One of the key questions arising from this Good Practice Guide is "How many lessons are sufficient before a youth player can play bridge unguided?". We cannot expect

youth players to sit through 90 hours of bridge tuition, and it is likely that adults in a similar position would find this tricky.

There are fewer issues with adults on lengthy courses, as they have chosen to commit time to the pursuit of bridge and separate time out for this learning experience. Yet, youth players have increasing demands on their time, and they may need a more basic structure of bridge understanding before they can play unaided rather than other youth-centred courses that focus more on system and progression. Once the question of how many lessons is answered, organisations will have a clearer understanding of what their youth players need to know as a minimum, and they can then focus on social and fun bridge rather than more lessons.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, the Skolebridge programme is a solid youth-centric course that continually wishes to improve to be a direct first step to more bridge playing youth. There are some refinements needed in course content, such as bidding and scoring, but the structure is secure for a bridge course over two academic years. There is good use of pedagogy such as session lengths, cognitive load, and an interactive learning experience. There is good feedback from adult bridge teachers regarding Skolebridge resources which have a greater emphasis on the basic learning points rather than complex detail.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Targeted events for adults and adult bridge players, alongside youth bridge players, encouraging parents and grandparents to play bridge to be part of a social community
2. Use of after school and inter-school competitions for novices to encourage continual play after the Skolebridge course ends in school for the year
3. Further research into definitive learning milestones so that youth bridge learners feel accomplishment in completing the Skolebridge course and children can see what they need to do to progress to the next level of their bridge journey.

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