

Foreign Language Education Reforms in Norway and Denmark

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The role of the English language in Norwegian society is wide-ranging. English has traditionally been viewed as a foreign language in Norway, although there was discussion of it becoming a second official language in the country in the 1990s (Graddol, 1997, pp. 11). The development of ‘Norwegian,’ a Norwegian ‘dialect’ of sorts integrated with English words and slang, emphasises this ambiguity. English has been offered in schools since 1939 (*Normalplan for byfolkeskolen*, 1939) at the discretion of each individual municipality. This led to notable differences between the municipalities (Steenaaasen, 1958 as cited in Simensen, 2014). As such, to encourage equality (Then and Volckmar, 2020), it became a nationally mandatory language for students in ‘grunnskolen’ / primary education with the ‘*Grunnskolelova*’ of 1969, from the 5th grade upwards.

In Denmark, English has been offered as an optional course in schools since 1809 (Olsen, 1947, pp.157), while French and German were mandatory to learn alongside Danish. Over the next two hundred years, the value of teaching English and other foreign languages fluctuated, until the 1970s when the structure of Danish schools were being reformed, leading also to an increased focus on foreign language education. Since then, there have been a variety of reforms developing the structure of English language and other 2nd foreign language learning, which have led to where the structure of the Norwegian and Danish educational systems and their teaching of foreign languages are today.

This poster summarises the main reforms that had a relevant influence on foreign language education in Danish and Norwegian schools.

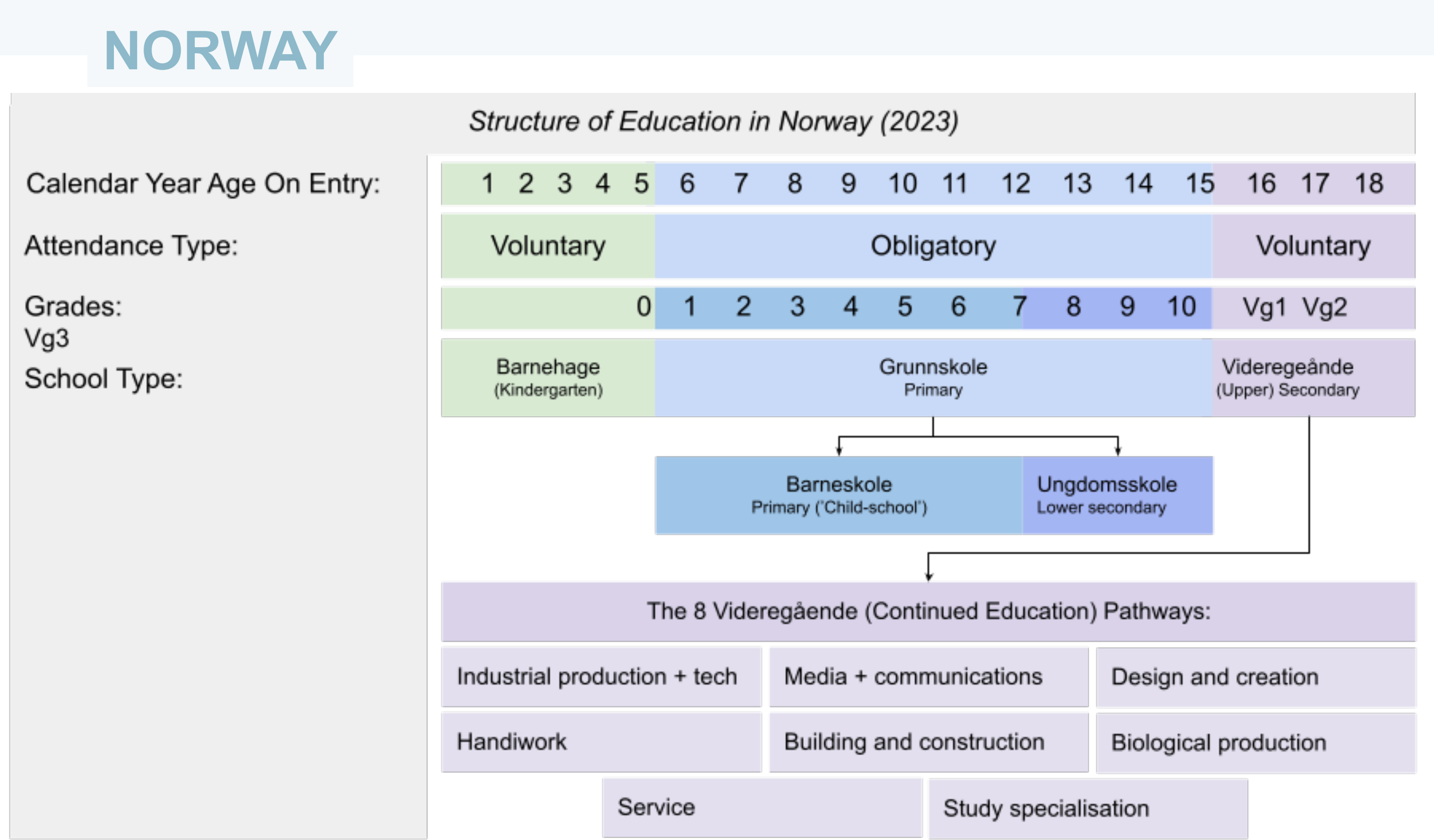


Figure 1: Diagram showing the structure of the education system in Norway at present (made by author, 2023)

M74: The first notable changes with Mønsterplan 74 were:

- The introduction of a national 9-year compulsory basic school, and
- The option to take a 2nd foreign language in lower secondary school (years 7-9).
 - German or French

At this point, one could only choose to study one 2nd foreign language. As an alternative to 2nd foreign language, one could specialise in another language they already speak; Norwegian, English, or Sami, or choose to do a practical project.

Following this, most Norwegian education reforms from the 1990s had the aim to create a **balance** between the typical academic exam-school structure and vocational education.

Reform 94: was mainly focused on upper secondary education, including:

- The introduction of the statutory right for everyone between the ages of 16 - 19 to upper secondary education (VGS), with the option of either academic courses or vocational training. This included ‘common’ or ‘shared’ courses: Norwegian/Sami, English, mathematics, social sciences, natural sciences, and physical education for students in all courses (incl. vocational), and
- A mandatory 2nd foreign language for non-vocational study paths.

This was introduced to make it easier for students to transfer from vocational to academic paths and vice versa (Meld. St. 21 (2020–2021), with the aim to lower dropout rates.

Reform 97:

- Lowered the age of entry into primary education from 7 to 6 years, and
- Extended the length of primary and lower secondary education (‘grunnskole’) from 9 to 10 years.
- Made it mandatory for all children starting in the 1st grade of primary school (ages 6 and upwards) to study English.

The reforms from the early 2000s focused on the development of basic competence in a wide array of subjects (Kvalitetsutvalget), as well as ensuring that formal education was held to a similar high standard across the country.

Kvalitetsutvalget (‘the quality selection’) worked towards this through developing ways to measure the quality of teaching in schools.

Kunnskapsløftet (LK06) then:

- Implemented a mandatory 2nd foreign language for lower secondary school, as Kvalitetsutvalget suggested
- Increased the number of required hours of English in school years 1-7 from 271 (R97) to 366

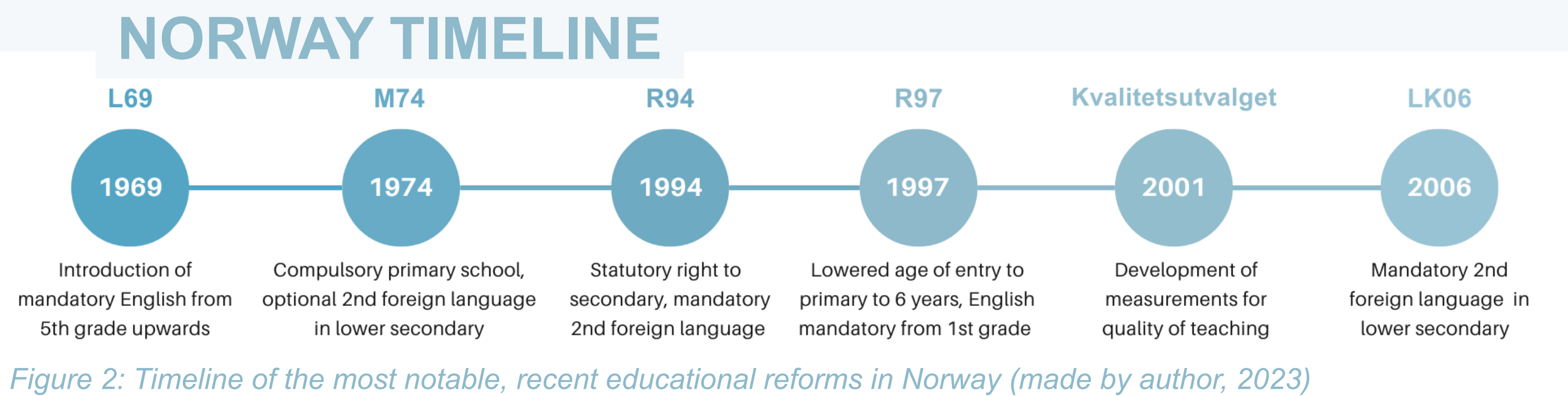


Figure 2: Timeline of the most notable, recent educational reforms in Norway (made by author, 2023)

EVALUATION

The main issue that prevails is lack of teacher competence, which may develop the ‘ceiling effect’ in students’ language competency in both Denmark and Norway. Denmark has had the **Sprogstrategi 2016-2020** implemented, and the Norwegian government developed **Kompetanse for Kvalitet** (KfK / Competence for Quality) in 2015 which states that by 2025, all teachers must have successfully completed a set amount of education in English in ‘grunnskolen’ (grades 1-10), which is hopefully be a step towards tackling this issue. It seems that, while past reforms have created a base for foreign language learning to be made possible and accessible, the quality of teaching and learning outcomes still need to be improved. It also seems that learning a foreign language at a young age may not be as important to comprehension and quality of learning as one would think (Utdanningsnytt.no, Friisberg 2023).

Regarding the next steps for this research – understanding the sociopolitical effects of foreign language education reforms, there are multiple general and minor reforms and policy changes that have been put in place in both countries over the last 50 years. These continuous changes and updates to policy make it relatively difficult to track, and as these reforms also emphasise and change other aspects of education simultaneously, it may be difficult to form a correlation between solely the foreign language reforms and the country’s sociopolitical views.

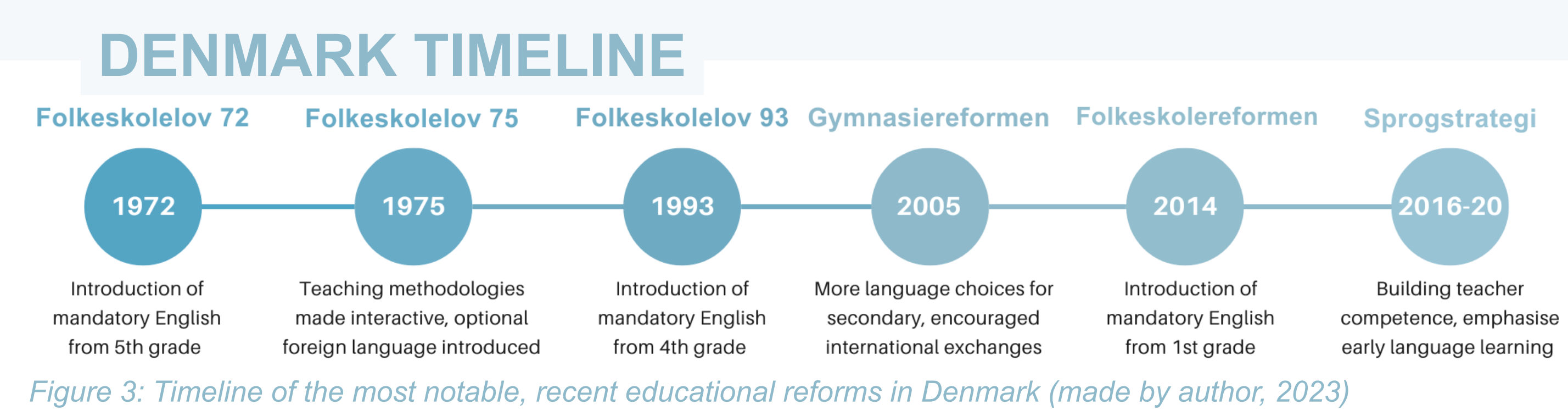


Figure 3: Timeline of the most notable, recent educational reforms in Denmark (made by author, 2023)

Denmark

Folkeskoleloven 1972: states that:

- Schooling would be done in Danish from grades 1-4, and English (or German) will be taught (mandatory) in 5th and 6th years, and German (or English - the opposite language to what you had taken before) in year 7 (see Stk. 2 and 3 of &17 on pp.324 of the *Lov om folkeskolen* from 8th May 1972).

It seems this change accompanied the extension of mandatory schooling from 8 to 9 years put in place in 1972 as well.

Folkeskoleloven 1975: is the product of a few years of proposals, including Knud Heinesen’s draft law in December 1972 (which aimed to introduce English as a mandatory subject from grades 4-9, and German from grades 7-9).

In January of 1975, Ritt Bjerregaard took over as education minister with the Social Democratic party, whose reform was broader than Heinesen’s initial proposals, with a focus on the following for the language-learning aspects:

- Shifting teaching methodologies to become more interactive and student centred
- Encouraging proper education of language teachers.
- Introduction of the option to study other foreign (European) languages (mainly French + Latin)

1993 Lov om Folkeskolen: replaced the 1975 reform, and included:

- Changes in language curriculum and teaching approaches of languages in secondary schools, placing greater emphasis on oral communication skills.
- The implementation of English a mandatory subject starting in the 4th grade (danmarkshistorien.dk B).

Gymnasireformen: the upper secondary school reform from 2005:

- increased the range of choices of languages to study in upper secondary education, and
- encouraged an increase in international exchanges and partnerships.

Its focus was, rather than purely increasing students’ academic capabilities, instead the use and consideration of language as a tool for cross-cultural communication.

Folkeskolereformen 2014:

- made English a mandatory subject from 1st grade onwards, and
- introduced new national curricula with increased focus on core subjects: Danish, Mathematics, and English.

Next, the ‘**Language Strategy of 2016-2020**’ was passed, including a variety of minor reforms that aim to emphasise early language learning and increase teacher competence.

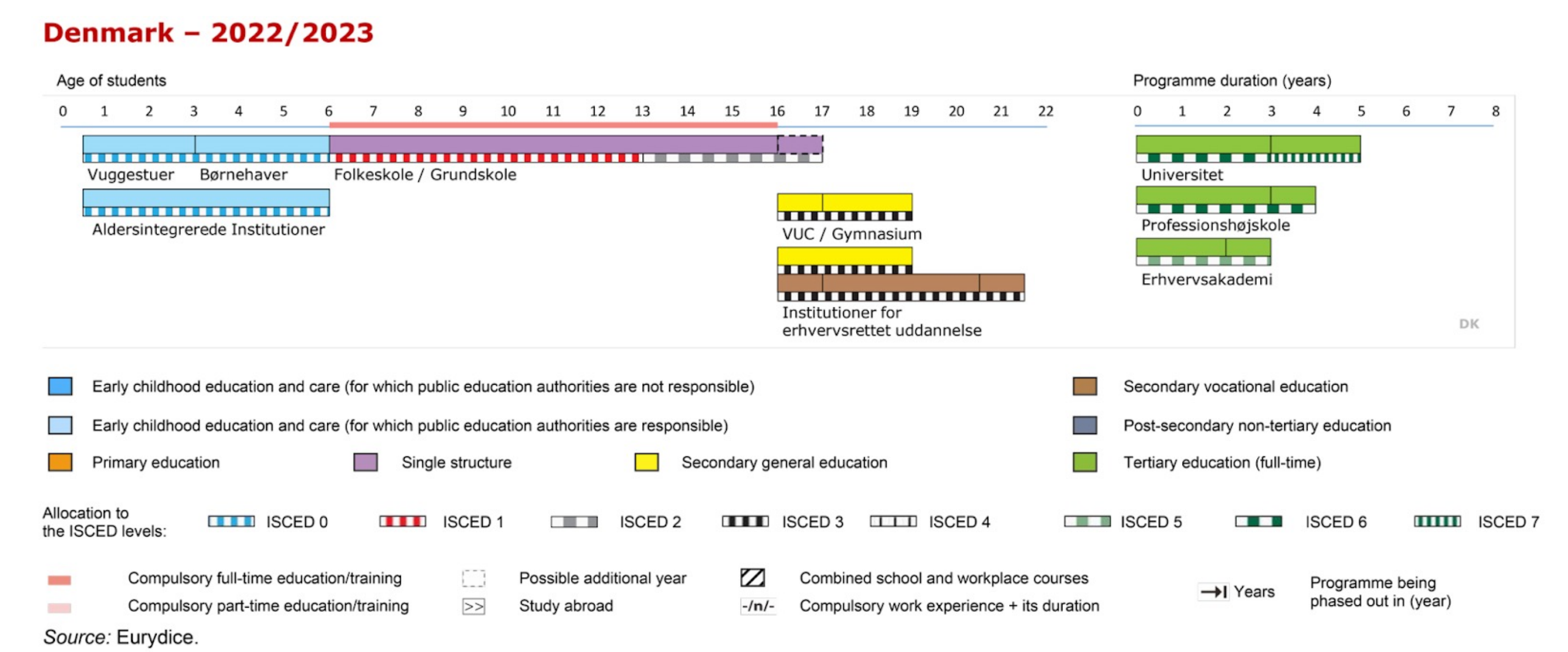


Figure 4: Diagram showing the structure of the education system in Denmark at present (Eurydice 2023)

Any questions?

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