

My year at Vandel Efterskole

Introduction

“No matter, who you are or what you are good at – being a year in Efterskole (or ESC), even the silent ones get their moment to shine.” – This was said by a teacher at the school I was volunteering at – he was my mentor in regards to the ESC if you will.

I believe this describes the concept of Efterskole really well. On the other hand it summarizes what this ESC really means to me.

The ESC is meant for “young” people seeking a different kind of experience. It is about living abroad, adapting to a new culture, meeting new people and learning about yourself. You are thrown into an entirely unknown environment and you have to find your way through. This strongly varies from project to project and from country to country. But in the end, you are constantly striving to be helpful and to make someone’s day a little bit better.

This brings me to one of the most important things I want you to know about this whole program: You may not be going to change the world, but... no one expects you to.

I went to Denmark, which probably is one of the best developed countries in the world. How could I possibly bring any value? Me, someone with no further education than the German high school degree. Slowly I realized that’s not what it is about. You are not hired to do any specific job. You are not there to fill a hole. You are there to be yourself – to contribute to what’s already there. You have to show excitement, do what you think brings value to the project and always seek for new things you can do.

I think many people go into an ESC and expect clear tasks. The only thing they know beforehand is the project description and who their contact persons are. This is something I struggled with and many others also do at some point. At least for me, there were some clear tasks - clean this, print that, make this, cut that out and so on. Those tasks can be really nice because you instantly see concrete results. Especially in the beginning it is very nice to have something to rely on, while you still get used to everything.

But for making your stay truly meaningful you have to go beyond that. Do things on your own initiative, as hard as that may sound. Referring to what I said previously: you are not hired for a specific job – you are hired as an individual. You like sports? – Go work out with the students, play soccer or badminton with them. You like music? – Sing something with them, record some fun songs or just jam around with your instruments. You like language? – Try learning Danish, get really really good at it and teach them your own language. Maybe you like arts and crafts? Why don’t you sew or paint something together - possibilities are endless. And even if you don’t know what you will enjoy most, just try everything! The beautiful thing about ESC is that you are given time, resources and a place to stay. I can only tell you my personal experiences from being at a school, but I am convinced that this applies to most of the projects out there.

On the other hand, it’s also fine to stay at your own place for the evening. If you sometimes don’t feel like doing anything, just take it easy. I know it can be intimidating – People are speaking a different language and, in the beginning, you don’t know anyone. I promise, Danes are the nicest people on earth, but for them to become more open and talking to you, it takes some time and persistence. But be sure, the longer you are with them the more you love it.

My life at Vandel Efterskole and gymnastics in Denmark

I haven't been a very sporty kid. Getting into school after a life of moving and exploring as a child means, suddenly a big portion of your day is spent behind a desk. I don't want to dramatize this. It's important to learn and we should all appreciate the opportunity to study at all.

But sports in school never really got me excited. It always felt like it was just about getting your grade. The teachers didn't really look like they were able to do the things demanded themselves – and there was never really the intention to make you try something new, to be playful and to have fun learning.

In tenth grade I found a gymnastics gym on the other side of my city. It was pretty old and whenever you jumped into the foam pit, you had dust in your eyes for the next ten minutes. But it became my new home.

It feels kind of surreal, looking at videos on the internet from people doing crazy flips. It looks so effortless. But there I was, surrounded by people better than me, ordinary people. Over the time I realized that with just a bit of practice and will anyone could do, what I just watched hours of on YouTube. You just had to take that leap – overcome your fear and jump.

To be honest, when looking for a project, one of the biggest criteria was the implementation of sports. First, I was kind of disappointed because I barely found anything. But one of the projects stood out. It was a Danish school – an Efterskole. I didn't really know what "Efterskole" meant at that point. I looked at their Instagram and was amazed instantly. This school seemed like everything a young person is dreaming about. The first three posts were teenagers jumping on trampolines – followed by handball, soccer and some group dancing I couldn't really name.

Arriving in Denmark the excitement about all I've seen online didn't stop...

Let's get to the core of what I want to tell. It is fascinating, how gymnastics and physical education in general benefit a person's development, when provided in a fun and interesting way.

There are two main things, I suppose, which helped me to connect with students unlike anything else. That is language and being active together.

Having at least some experience in gymnastics gave me rising confidence in that direction – especially in the beginning. I tried attending the gymnastics classes more and more. The beautiful thing as a volunteer is that you get to experience both sides of school life. On the one hand I was learning together with the students and the first time I felt like the gym teachers actually knew what they were teaching. They either are still active gymnasts themselves, or they have a strong background in gymnastics – it's their life and their passion. I think during my time in Denmark my skills drastically increased, just because it is so present and accessible at all time.

More than the lessons, it is the time outside of them spent on the trampolines, airtracks or simply working out in the gym that made me connect with the students. Being in between teachers and students allows you so much, especially in a country where both are really close.

But there is also the teaching side when being a volunteer at a school. As I said I tried my best contributing something to the early gymnastics lessons. During my stay in Denmark, I believe there

was nothing more fulfilling than having students trust you and your advice, you being the only thing holding them when they take the leap. It simply is the biggest boost in confidence you can give a 15-year-old. Having them land their first flip - and not dying - just brings up the biggest smile in a student's face. You just made their day.

Young people sometimes need an outlet. There are quite some troublemakers. Sports, especially gymnastics are just the best way to clean up their minds. The respect they have for the gym teachers widely exceeds the respect they have towards other teachers. Experiencing the whole sports/gymnastics world truly makes you respect everyone who does the same. You know how hard it is to take that leap. Physically, it might be easier for some but surely a mental challenge for all.

This brings me to one of my favorite parts about Vandel Efterskole's gymnastics gym: the bell. Next to the trampolines, you can find a big metal bell hanging from the wall. Whoever does a new trick for the first time gets to ring the bell. It doesn't matter how advanced it was what you did – the whole gym starts clapping. It's about showing respect to the work and effort you put in and that mental challenge you just overcame. You took the leap, and ... became a little bit better and more confident than yesterday. In the end you have to commit because nobody else can do it for you.

I may be over dramatizing that whole gymnastics theme. I got a little caught up in it to be honest. I'm sure, even if gymnastics is not your thing – what I wrote applies in some way to your interest. A year of ESC gives you so many opportunities of things to try and allows you to progress as a person.



Mixing languages

I already mentioned language, but I really want to emphasize the importance of learning it. When I came to Denmark, I had the mindset of: "I want to learn a little Danish, BUT it's not that big of a language. Surely English will be enough for the most part." – to be honest, it was just laziness and not knowing how important learning the language really was. I am not telling you to stress out about speaking the local language fluently before even arriving at your project. I literally downloaded the Duolingo App at the airport and it was fine.

But once you start living at your project, I strongly advise you to take language classes seriously - whether your project offers them, or you go to a dedicated language school. I was lucky because my

fellow volunteer at the project was really into it and became very skilled quickly. That gave me the final push to work harder myself.

Many sources tell you how good the English levels are in Denmark. I was surprised how advanced even the older people spoke. But still, the day to day life is held in Danish – obviously. People are nice and whenever you ask, they are happy to translate for you. Anyways, it felt like I was missing out on something: personal conversations, questions raised in the lessons, jokes made by the teachers. I came there to be helpful and not knowing the language really hindered that.

But once my Danish skills increased – it opened up for so many unique moments. Being serious about learning Danish shows so much respect. It shows that you care and that you are interested in their culture. There is nothing better than having a student make a joke on you and then seeing their face when they realize, you understood every single word. People get interested in your language, too. Danish, English, German... everything gets mixed up and you have that funny soup of words.



Conclusion

The more time I spent in Denmark, the more I felt like a part of it. I became better in Danish and I accepted being the German – not a teacher, not a student. Having my own unique role and bringing something valuable to someone's day.

An ESC like this is a big learning curve. You learn about a different culture, language and so many new people. You try out things you never did before and you realize what your strengths are and the things you can be proud of. I found a second home and a place to definitely come back and visit in the future.

There will be ups and downs, no doubt. But if you remain positive throughout that, if you keep seeking new ways of connecting with people and things to do, if you are open and willing to try, share and say yes to as much as you can – an ESC is the perfect experience for you. People will welcome you and will proudly share their culture.

If you want to read more about volunteering in Denmark or read more about Dansk ICYE and their exchange program, please visit www.icye.dk/volunteer-dk/.

KH Johann



Dansk ICYE

International Cultural Youth Exchange



**EUROPEAN
SOLIDARITY
CORPS**



Co-funded by the
European Solidarity Corps
of the European Union