

The Rise of Private Tutoring in Denmark: An Entrepreneur's Perspectives and Experiences

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Highlights

- This article sheds light on the emergence of private tutoring in Denmark. Written from the perspective of a tutoring entrepreneur, it discusses the challenges and opportunities faced by a fledgling tutoring company in present-day Danish society.
- The article is a personal narrative of the author's experience with establishing the first major Danish tutoring company.
- The enthusiastic response by parents to the services offered by the author's company shows that there has long existed a hitherto unmet need for private tutoring in Denmark. However, the author also argues that the political turmoil surrounding the 2013 Danish school reform made parents increasingly sceptical that mainstream schools could effectively address the needs of their children. It thereby prepared the ground for launching a private tutoring concept.
- It is only in the last decade that private tutoring has emerged in Denmark. The article provides a unique insider's perspective on this largely unexplored development.

Keywords

COVID-19 crisis, Denmark, MentorDanmark, mentoring, private tutoring

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Introduction

Private tutoring has existed in Denmark for a long time. One famous example is the Danish fairy-tale writer Hans Christian Andersen who received intensive coaching in Danish, German, and Latin in preparation for his university entrance exams in 1828. Until recently, however, private tutoring existed mainly on an ad-hoc and informal basis. There was no organized market, no industry standards—and very little tax revenue for the state.

It is only in the last decade that this situation has really started to change. There is now a small, but significant market for private tutoring, and private tutoring is increasingly viewed as a viable business and not just as a source of pocket money or supplementary income. As the founder and CEO of Denmark's largest tutoring company, MentorDanmark, I was deeply involved in this from the start. This article is my personal account of the emergence of private tutoring in Denmark. I explain what drew me to tutoring as a vocation and I point out the social and political conditions, which made my timing auspicious. However, I also highlight some of the challenges and resistance, which we met as entrepreneurs in this new and, to some, controversial market. I conclude by discussing how my company (and the tutoring industry as a whole) has been affected by the COVID-19 crisis—and what this crisis may mean for the future of private tutoring.

My story

After a failed attempt at starting a business, which produced educational videos to high school students from 2007 to 2009, I enrolled in university and had part-time employment as a badminton coach and substitute teacher in various subjects at a nearby public school. I enjoyed teaching so much that I started spending all my spare time at the local library, preparing the lessons I was going to have. Eventually, it led me to spend more time teaching than I spent at university—so much that my colleagues, the other substitute teachers, began nicknaming me “the overachieving sub,” but that did not deter me because the students loved my lessons and method of teaching. My substitute colleagues were not always properly prepared, and did not seem to take the job very seriously, which in turn did not fit well in a classroom with unruly children. It might be a coincidence that my entrepreneurial desire led to a business in private tutoring, but I would like to attribute it to my experience with teaching and coaching badminton.

In April 2013, a nationwide conflict between the Danish Teachers Union and the Coalition of Danish Municipalities broke out. Every unionized teacher in the country was locked out and enjoined by the Union to demonstrate outside schools and public buildings. As a substitute, I was not a party to this conflict and was therefore among the few who still had to teach the students. I experienced immense frustration among the students of the half-empty school, especially among

the graduating classes, who knew nothing about their academic future. I wanted to help them with all skills, time, and effort at my disposal.

For a long time, I had been thinking about a private concept and realized that now was the time. The teaching profession is inherently creative, but I needed to build my own, to start a new thing, instead of having a fixed system to operate in. A private concept would be free to accommodate the need for individualized learning, to supply a product for all the parents who wished to give their child or children something extra in terms of education. Even though markets existed in Asia and the U.S., my main source of inspiration came from the Swedish market, the concept MyAcademy, and also the German market which had a culture similar to ours in many ways. Using my knowledge from substitute teaching and the experience of one-on-one coaching I knew from badminton and supportive teaching in schools, I founded my company and began supplying tutors to children that needed them. That was the beginning of a Scandinavian entrepreneurial adventure—MentorDanmark.

The establishing phase—In the middle of a storm

I needed an office and aligned myself with another company that happened to have a spare room for me to use. More accurately they had a spare storage room from where I started out on a cardboard box with my laptop. I did promotional posts about the initiative from my own Facebook profile and signed the first clients. The clients paid up-front, and the revenue I collected I immediately spent on arranging free exam courses for the frustrated ninth graders. It was a bit controversial, to say the least, to offer free classes when the conflict had not been resolved, and the initiative was put on the front page of Denmark's most-read newspaper "Ekstrabladet." They called it, among other things, the Robin Hood method.

When the conflict was resolved, it also brought about a school system reform. One of the major changes was the establishment of mandatory homework cafés where children now were expected to do homework and preparations, something that had not been mandatory before, where children usually did homework at home; consequently, the media now called MentorDanmark clapped-out/doomed, and predicted that there would not be a demand for our tutoring or courses.

The reality was completely different, however. In our first year, we experienced a tripling of the demand, and the year after that another doubling. Our concept was well-received nationwide, and the recommendations traveled through word of mouth from families that used our services. Through the establishment of mandatory homework cafés, the government, municipalities, and schools sent a clear signal to the parents about the need for extra help. We often heard stories of cafés being staffed by only one teacher or pedagogue, and this single person being assigned to help two to three entire classes, around 80 students simultaneously. This was an error in priorities

from a rather large reform. Naturally, this, in turn, led to the parents seeking alternatives and calling MentorDanmark.

The innovative phase—Shaping the concept

The idea was private tutoring at home executed by either an aspiring teacher or a university student, in a form of a young-to-younger concept. We had to be much more than just tutoring. An educator at MentorDanmark should also function as a role model that a student could look up to. Therefore, the term “mentor” was best suited, and the company was dubbed MentorDanmark. In the beginning, it was difficult for many to understand why it was not called tutor or homework-helper, but we stuck with it, and today the term mentor is almost synonymous with the act of receiving private tutoring in Denmark—which is of great benefit to our brand value. From a more pedagogical point of view, the term mentor has fewer negative connotations, which meant that the parents had fewer issues convincing their children to participate. If we had called them teachers, educators, tutors, or something similar, our conviction was that the students would believe something was wrong with them as they had to have extra aid, which was to be avoided if possible.

In the beginning, we faced multiple difficulties, primarily the geographical distance between the mentor and the family in need of tutoring. The transportation was often long, and when a family was required to reimburse their mentor for the costs and time, they often changed their minds. We quickly realized how important it was to have a vast and wide network of mentors. So even though it was easier to focus on the capital and nearby suburbs, I insisted on being nationwide. We had to cover all subjects and every major city. The financial situation was limited, so the recruitment of mentors, which began with an interview and the following screening of competency and teaching methods, was conducted at cafés both indoors and outdoors if, need be. It was all very ad hoc in the beginning, but everyone was understanding the fact that we were a start-up, so it all went well. I filmed all my interviews with the candidates and then asked a school principal for help in assessing the potential mentor. In pace with our growing ranks, I saw the potential to create even better match-ups between students and mentors. In addition to geography, we were able to differentiate by pastime activities, personality traits, preferred learning environment, and other parameters. Confident in the quality of our matches, we offered parents a free introductory meeting.

Our educational foundation

When I worked as a substitute teacher I cared deeply for my students’ involvement. It was all about wanting to learn and the key to making it enjoyable. I sought a theoretical perspective for teaching that reflected exactly that. A couple of years ago, a TV show called “The School—World-class in 100

days” was aired on TV2, Denmark’s largest commercial TV channel. The show was about increasing the level of academic achievement in a school by using methods that built on the model of individualized learning styles developed by Rita and Kenneth Dunn. This model has since been further developed upon by the Swedish professor, Lena Boström, and Danish communication expert, Svend Erik Schmidt, into what they call “the Scandinavian Learning Style Model.” The main theory is that we all learn in individual ways. In the TV show, the school had 100 days to show rapid improvement, which they did to extraordinary degrees. Therefore, I contacted Svend Erik Schmidt, and together we built the foundation for MentorDanmark’s individualized learning programs. From a commercial perspective, it was important to have our own foundation for learning, to give an advantage and unique selling point in a time where competitors started to copy our concept as we grew.

From this day forward, all new students had to have their learning styles tested before beginning a tutoring program. The results mapped preferences in learning environments, but most importantly showed the mentor how to approach the student. The mentors needed training, which took place at workshops that we made a great deal of. In the beginning, it was big events where our mentors would arrive on a red carpet and had their photos taken like celebrities and stars. The feedback was amazing. It was about creating a desire to learn, and the children, our students, experienced it as much more engaging and fun than traditional methods. Our mentors reported the same thing—especially when it came to small children.

Developing phase—It became crucial

In the early beginnings of MentorDanmark, everything was done manually. Reports from tutoring sessions were collected via MS Word documents, our list of mentors was an Excel spreadsheet, and our clients were written on yellow post-it notes, stuck to a whiteboard, where we could track the progress through the program. Sometimes they fell overnight, which made it hard to remember where each note belonged. It was a manual administration hell, to say the least. I soon realized that if we wanted to scale this concept, we had to think of smarter solutions in IT. We developed our own system, which we dubbed Berta, the name derived from an email in which the beta-system was misspelled. It was a huge relief and provided a considerable boost to our performance. Over the years we developed a wide variety of tools for both administration and tutoring. The data gathered serves multiple purposes. First progress reports help to keep parents in the loop on any given session. Next is to create a paper trail in the course so our office staff is able to pull up the entire history of clients to help them in the best possible way. Lastly, it is to further develop the product, as we try to find trends in the courses we are providing. Recently this has led to a focus on dyslexia and other learning difficulties.

Expanding phase—We had a growth spurt

We quickly grew out of the storage room and began to take up more and more space in the company in which we were originally situated. Even with tables that fitted two, we grew too fast for our office space to handle.

We moved into one of the most central locations of Copenhagen and took over an entire floor. In the beginning, it was nerve-racking because we had more space than we needed, but after just a few months we needed more space. As of today, we currently occupy the three top floors of our building, which houses 85 employees, divided into Marketing, Accounting, IT, Operations, Recruitment, and General Management.

In 2014, we opened a satellite office in the second largest city of Denmark, Århus. But doubling the team turned out to be ineffective. Instead, we reorganized ourselves in a way that we had local recruiters that we could activate when needed. That decision made us more locally present because we could go to more areas and turn the activity level up or down according to our need for new mentors.

The competition

At first, we had a Swedish competitor called MyAcademy. They opened their offices in Copenhagen and focused there. They were a big company in Sweden and had a ready-made concept and professional setup with an IT platform and financial support to do a lot of marketing when they entered the Danish market. MyAcademy had established a Danish subsidiary before MentorDanmark was established, which meant they also had a head start. Personally, I had a good relationship with their Danish director, who I met with multiple times, even though I was working around the clock to beat them. I told myself that when they had a break, we kept working. When they went on a weekend, we kept working. When they took a vacation, we kept working. Even when they slept, we kept working. For months I slept more nights at the office than I did at home because I insisted on breaking through with our tutoring concept—and my staff felt the same way. The Danish parents were more interested in their children thriving in the educational system than they were concerned with academic achievement, so where MyAcademy's marketing was concerned with grades, ours were focused on the whole child. We felt that we were creating something new and unique in Denmark. We invested every penny made into development and marketing. Everyone had to know who MentorDanmark was. As of this day, MyAcademy has withdrawn from the Danish market and only operates in Sweden. I think we won this battle because everyone could feel our passion, be it the families, mentors, students, or colleagues. It also helped that the tax deduction scheme for private tutoring in Sweden was abolished, thus creating uncertainties in MyAcademy's home market.

Community

It has always been a matter of great importance for us to make our mentors feel that they are a part of something greater when they start working for MentorDanmark, so in the last 2 years, we have held an award show for our mentors, called MentorAwards, a huge event where we celebrate the mentors making a difference in the lives of young people every day. The awards are given in categories such as Passionate Soul, Role Model, Mentor of the Year, and of course Student of the Year. As entertainment, we feature prominent comedians and musical artists, and it all ends with a great party with an amazing mood. It is just a way of recognizing and celebrating the effort we see our skilled mentors put forward. They keep showing us their passion, and week after week they inspire young people to make a positive change in their educational lives.

Branding and marketing

Even though we primarily grew through word-of-mouth recommendations, we also had a lot of marketing initiatives. Of course, being a start-up meant that in the beginning, we had no money to spend, which forced us to get creative. When you are selling private tutoring, you are to a high extent selling trust, which we recognized early on. We communicated our credibility through athlete sponsorships and later on bus and TV adverts. All in an effort to target the parents on Facebook with images and videos of a highly trustworthy and credible company. We went all-in on the use of social media as a marketing tool, in a time where most mothers in the ages above 40 years began to get a Facebook profile. It had a tremendous effect. From there, the storytelling began to contain a lot of real-life accounts from mentors, families, and students about what made a difference in their everyday lives.

Next expanding phase—Going global

The ambitions were high. I kept repeating the same phrase; “we want to be the world’s first global tutoring company” over and over again, and the slogan became “What Lego is for toys, we want to be for tutoring.” On my very first day on this journey, I purchased a map of Europe and hung it in the middle of my storage room.

Already 1.5 years after the initial start of MentorDanmark we launched the same concept in Norway, under the company name MentorNorge A/S. We opened offices in Oslo with a national director, Andreas Bjerkedal, who also got ownership of the company. We copied our Danish concept and brought all of our experiences with us. We quickly became the biggest actor in the Norwegian market. It was all driven locally by a team led by Andreas, but IT development and

conceptual changes took place in Denmark. With this, we proved the scalability of our concept in Scandinavia and now only needed a presence in Sweden.

We had a Swedish website made, adapted IT systems, and recruited and trained a corps of 200 mentors. Tutoring had benefitted from a tax subsidy, which made the market highly lucrative and was also the reason that Sweden was the only Scandinavian country with an established industry consisting of a handful of larger companies that had grown big in the ten years this tax subsidy was in place. Unfortunately, Swedish politicians removed these subsidies, and we pulled the plug on the expansion and instead chose to bide our time and monitor the development in this market and move in at a more opportune time.

While the Swedish expansion was put on hold, we instead looked towards Germany and established MentorDeutschland GmbH. We opened offices in Hamburg and were ready to conquer another market. It was a short-lived experience though. We were still a young company, and we could not afford many mistakes. We severely underestimated how much capital we would need to breakthrough in a market of billion-euro enterprises existing since the 1970s. We opted out after 6 months and decided to invest our time and efforts to further develop the core concept in Denmark and Norway. The ambition however remains unchanged; we want to go out into the world and help as many children and young people as possible.

Honors and recognitions

In the process, we have received a range of entrepreneurial and business awards. This means a lot to us, and me personally, being a source of pride for all of us. In 2014, we won the first major award as “growth-adventurer of the year” from Ivækstprisen. The day after receiving the award, I was invited on national television to talk about our concept live in their morning show. It was a fantastic opportunity to reach the general public. In 2015, we won the prestigious award “entrepreneur of the year” in the start-up category, awarded to us by Ernst & Young. This meant front-page articles and great recognition in business circles. In 2017, we won the Nordic Start-up Award, by first winning the national award, and later also the Nordic award in the category “People’s Choice.” In 2018, we were awarded the “business of the year” in the category innovation, awarded by the local government of Copenhagen.

In Denmark, there has not been a tradition for private tutoring, so the vast amount of publicity is of course due to the novel phenomenon that we are. We are used to receiving education for free, and that it is a school’s job to singlehandedly educate the students. Due to our controversial beginnings, and the media who said that our success was brought about from a failing school system, we were not very popular among educators. Our concept was instantly viewed as a critique of teachers in

general. As time has passed, we have won more respect and recognition in the Danish schools, and slowly the perception has shifted to a point where we now receive inquiries from parents who had us recommended by their teachers. For teachers to recommend us daily is for me the highest form of recognition, and it has led to many municipalities contacting us for additional help with children struggling.

Investment phase—New co-owner and investor

At the end of 2018, we brought Gyldendal A/S, the largest publisher in Denmark, along on the journey. They supply school materials to every school and educational institution in Denmark. This means that we can make use of high-quality educational materials to an extent we had previously been unable to. We want to be a more content-based tutoring company with an offer to parents who do not have the required materials to have a productive session. The investment has given MentorDanmark more opportunities, more respectability, and more history than before. The support of a well-established and respected company opens a lot of doors to the future.

The COVID-19 crisis and the future

Like so many other businesses, we received a massive blow when the COVID-19 crisis hit in early 2020. Suddenly, everything we had achieved seemed to be in danger. Almost overnight, demand for our services fell by 80%–90%. Instead, we scrambled to retain the customers we already had. Parents had never shown interest in online tutoring and almost all our services were therefore conducted on an offline/physical basis. Furthermore, a vast number of examinations were canceled, which reduced the need for private tutoring. Nevertheless, we persuaded the majority of parents to continue tutoring on an online basis. At the same time, we tried to help schools and students as best as we could. A total of 300 of our mentors volunteered for an online tutoring service, which we offered for free to all students in the country. We also offered schools a “matchmaking service,” helping them to find substitute teachers in a more convenient and precise way.

In December 2020, Denmark went into a second lockdown and we feared again a catastrophic decline in demand. This time, however, parents seemed more prepared and we were, therefore, less affected by the lockdown. At present, Danish society has largely re-opened and demand for tutoring services is almost back to pre-COVID-19 levels. It is therefore time to start thinking about the future for the company—and for private tutoring in general. When COVID-19 hit, it seemed that it would change everything, including in private tutoring. Today I am less certain. Tutors as well as students have become much more literate in using online technologies for learning purposes. On the other hand, the COVID-19 crisis has also created a profound “online fatigue.” More than ever, students

and parents demand the intimacy of face-to-face tutoring. Even if online tutoring is set to become a significant aspect of private tutoring in the future, I therefore believe that MentorDanmark's focus on offline, face-to-face tutoring has stood the test of the COVID-19 crisis.

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