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A Diversity of Schools: The Danish School Acts of 1814

Introduction

In 1780 there were two schools in the parish of Magleby in the southern part of Sealand: one in Magleby and one in Stignæs¹. Combined, the schools had approximately 80 pupils in the age-range of 6-15. Around a quarter of the pupils attended school in Magleby, the rest in Stignæs. Søren Pind was the headmaster at Stignæs School. In 1780, he was 55 years old, married to Birthe Marie but had no children of his own. Headmaster Pind was the son of the deacon of Skælskør, who had himself once been a teacher in Stignæs. Pind had no formal teacher training but this was not a requirement.

Headmaster Pind started each teaching day with a morning hymn and prayer with the assembled children who knelt during the prayer. At the end of the prayer, he would read a passage from the Bible after which the children would each continue where they had left off in their school books. They sat around two tables; girls at one and boys at the other as it was specified in the teachers instructions that girls and boys must not sit next to each other.

Not all of the 60 pupils at Stignæs School attended every day. Particularly during the spring and autumn, there was much agricultural work to attend to also and they were required to help. During these periods, it was mostly the smaller children who came to school, their labour being of lesser value than their elders', also whilst they were in school they would not get in the way of workers in the fields. Many older children attended school rarely, only returning during the winter before their confirmations to revise. A child could be confirmed as soon as the pastor meant

¹ C. Larsen, E. Nørr & P. Sonne, *Da skolen tog form. 1780-1850*. [When Schools Were Shaped: 1780 – 1850]. Volume 2 of Ning de Coninck-Smith & Charlotte Appel (eds), "Dansk skolehistorie – hverdag, vilkår og visioner gennem 500 år" [Schools in Denmark: A History of Everyday Life, Conditions, and Visions over 500 Years]. Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2013, 432 pp.

that its reading skills and Christian faith were adequate. The child had no need for other knowledge and, with the exception of the enrolment fee, this basic education was free.

An observer of the scholastic conditions of 1780 returning to southern Sealand 70 years later would have seen much that was changed. There were however many continuities. Superficially, there were fine new school buildings. At Stignæs, a new school had been built in 1820 after the old building had burnt to the ground a year earlier. A near naked teacher had rescued the children from the conflagration at the last moment. From 1834 to 1871, the teacher at Stignæs was Niels Lerche who was educated at the teacher training college. There was now app. 80 children at Magleby and Stignæs respectively and the total number of pupils in the parish had risen to 190. Both schools were divided into two classes, the smaller children in the lower class and the older in the upper. The classes had alternating school attendance as there was only one teacher.

From 1780 to 1850, there were several changes to school attendance in Magleby parish: More children attended school, children were now divided into classes and there were more demands on the teachers. There was however, much that remained unchanged. Reading and scripture remained the most important subjects and children continued to take part in agricultural labour in village towns throughout the countryside and artisanal labour in the towns.

A variety of schools

Many of the changes seen at the schools in Magleby Parish can be seen in the other parts of the Danish realm. In several instances it is possible to point to specific paragraphs in the Danish school acts of 1814 as the cause of these similarities. There were however, both before and after 1814, considerable differences between schools attended by children of different backgrounds and from different areas. Throughout the period, there existed a fundamental divide between children from the towns and children from the countryside and it was because of this that instead of a single school law a series of parallel acts were passed. Differences included the number of school days and the choice of subjects. Additionally, children of differing social classes seldom attended the same school. In the country, the pastor and squires children were educated privately and not at the village school and in the towns, the children of the middle class attended different schools than the poor and the most privileged were educated separately.

Gender was the other major separating factor. This was particularly prominent in families who educated their children beyond the elementary level. Boys typically attended school

for longer than their sisters and were educated in a wider range of subjects at different locations and by different teachers than the girls.

There were also variations between the various realms of the Danish Crown. The school day was different in the German-speaking and commercially advanced towns of the Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein as it was on the Faroe Islands or on the heaths of western Jutland. The situation for a teacher at a private school for the sons of wealthy families in Copenhagen was very different from one teaching peasant children on the island of Bornholm or teaching child slaves in the Danish West Indies.

This variety of schools at the beginning and end of the period makes discussion of a common development difficult. The increased demands on teachers, pupils, school buildings and curricula were felt universally, especially after the reforms of 1814 and contributed to the consolidation of the school system. However, precisely because the starting points for schools were so varied, the results of the reform varied wildly.

Not one but five school laws

In Denmark it is common to talk of *the* school act of 1814, in reality there were five acts. Three of these were launched on 29th July 1814. They set the standards for schools in different parts of the country. One concerned the rural districts of the Danish Kingdom (modern Denmark), another market towns and the third the capital of Copenhagen. Two other acts concerned the Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein and the Jews within the Danish Kingdom.

Several key elements of the laws of 1814 had their roots in the reform period of the 1780's and 1790' with its debates and the 1789 Great School Commission. The idea was that the public school system should extend the knowledge beyond the Christian scriptures, that school should play a more important role in the lives of all children and with the state taking responsibility for the country's public school system. Experiences gained in earlier reforms of private and gentry's schools became central to the new thinking concerning schools.

The laws of 1814 cannot be simply understood as late or delayed results of the foresaid reform period. Other agendas had emerged over the years. These concerned the desire to tackle the poor and uneducated children in urban areas and to control the unchecked school reforms, particularly in the capital. The poor laws of 1799 and 1803 had made schooling compulsory for children in care of the poor-law authorities. A third important factor was the interest of the state in bringing up loyal subjects, willing and able to defend King and Country. In addition to this, a new

understanding of citizenship (*borgerdyd*) and nationhood (*fædrelandskærlighed*) resulted in a greater focus on the need to raise children towards patriotism and loyalty to the absolute monarch. Study trips to model schools abroad, during the preceding decades, the dissemination of foreign pedagogic writings and a widespread production of pedagogic literature must also be seen as an important part of the background to the new legislation.

In several respects the agenda of 1814 differed from the optimistic formulae of the 1780's and 1790's. The cultural and high political tendencies in Europe had contributed to these developments. The optimism of the enlightenment had given way to a more conservative current, influenced, amongst other factors, by the developments in France where the revolutionary Republic had been eclipsed by Napoleon's Empire. In 1805, the country's education ministry, the Danish Chancellery, had rejected the introduction of teaching history, geography, natural science, natural history and mechanics as separate subjects with the reasoning that: "it is to be feared that by going too far in these matters one might remove the peasant from his actual occupation".

The final act concerning rural districts only referred to commoners, i.e. not children from other social classes such as the children of clergymen or landowners. The sons and daughters of the clergy, civil servants, wealthy landowners or manufacturers could not be satisfied with the level of education which was the common standard; they were expected to attain a higher level of education. It would also be unthinkable that the two groups of children should share the same school and daily life. There were differences between people and the general opinion was that this should continue. Finally it was seen as natural that the wealthy should pay for their own children's education and not avail themselves of the free option. Similar principles governed the school systems in the market towns.

The twin goals of education were to be "the dissemination of true religiosity and the promotion of good citizenship" (*udbrede sand religiøsitet og fremkalde borgerlige dyder*) and were reflected in the curriculum: Christianity, reading, writing and arithmetic. History, geography and other useful skills were still to be integrated with instruction in reading and writing. And as an innovation, boys were to learn gymnastics if the teacher was able to instruct them in the subject. Gymnastics was intended to prepare the peasant boys for their time as conscripts, partly through physical training and partly to accustom them to obey commands and to march.

The law concerning Jews of 29th March 1814 differed in several respects from the other laws. The law was more a general definition of the Jewish community's rights and duties and it did not directly refer to education or schooling. The law did however contain elements which made an oath

of loyalty and religious examination a duty for all Jewish youths. The religious examination was in many ways similar to confirmation in the state church and required, in the same way, a preparatory education. The law made no demands as to how this education should be organised.

Schleswig and Holstein were duchies of the Danish King but were subject to a different constitution, demography, economy and educational traditions than the Kingdom. Therefore the same law could not be applied here. The new law, promulgated in Danish and German, applied to burgher schools in the small towns and market towns (or hamlets as they were called) and country schools in the countryside. The school law asserted that the goal of education in rural districts was not merely the teaching of reading, writing and religion, but also to include necessary and useful skills, especially those fitted to the children's future as farmers.

Not all parts of the Danish King's realm received new legislation. Frederick VI had recently abandoned Norway in favour of the Swedes. The new law had therefore no effect in Norway. The original plan was that the legislation should apply to market towns in both countries. On the other hand, it had never been the plan that the law concerning rural schools should also cover the rural districts where daily life was far removed from that in the Danish countryside.

Reform of public schooling in the farthest reaches of the Danish king's territories was also not broached. Schools in the northern territories (Iceland, the Faroes and Greenland) and those in the tropical colonies were a widely different phenomenon from those in the heartlands. Therefore, in the lands distant from Copenhagen, 1814 marked no historic change in scholastic conditions.

Five narratives of how “schools took shape”

The school legislation of 1814 showed a desire to make schools a part of state business for which the government took responsibility; it issued guidelines for nearly all the conditions in a school, from personnel and curricula to buildings and discipline. The laws, however, cannot alone describe how and why the public schools developed as they did. There was too much variety and too much was left to the local negotiations between many different parties. The school laws of 1814 were a central part, though still only a part of a process referred to as “the shaping of schools”. To appreciate the changes and also the contexts which were relevant in the period 1780-1850, the following five narratives illustrate the concrete conditions affecting the daily life of schooling.

Schools took on a physical form

The first account deals with the process whereby schools took physical form. In the countryside, there had been, in many places, adequate school buildings for several generations. These were especially common where the local landowner, or his representative, had seen it as their duty to secure a roof over the heads of the teachers and pupils. During the 1720's and particularly in the east of Denmark, a considerable number of schools were constructed, amongst others Frederick IV's schools on crown estate (*rytterskoler*). Schools were also constructed in the wake of the school law of 1739. In the 1780's and 1790's there was another wave of school construction, often in conjunction with school reform on private estates. Other areas had proceeded differently. Here schools were constructed for example as an extension of the parish dean's manse, in an old barn or in a vacant building of variable quality. In market towns and in Copenhagen the buildings occupied by schools also differed widely.

Permanent schoolhouses were prioritised, even in the difficult economic times following state bankruptcy in 1813, and during the 70 years from 1780 to 1850 the vast majority of schools were established in their own buildings. It was a growing expectation that a school was a solid physical place. Instrumental in the emerging uniformity of schoolhouses was that the laws of 1814 were followed by architects' sketches of so called model schools (*modeltegninger for mønsterskoler*) which were sent out all over the country by the government during the 1820's. The government's so-called model school for the Kingdom was an extension of the school reform in County of Sorø in the early 1800's. This was in turn based on a school reform on the Crown estates in North Sealand, which in turn was an extension of the school reforms of the 1720's. Tradition played a prominent role in the design of the new schools.

This did not mean that all new schools were the same. School buildings were not only a question of economy, but also depended on the number of pupils and the local building traditions. There was also often disagreement about the scope and method of construction – was it, for example, really necessary to build a new-fangled gymnastic facility? Schoolhouses all over the country began to resemble each other more but there were still local variations. Negotiations over how a school building should be laid out, both exterior and interior, is central to understanding how schools as a phenomenon was understood by the main players both centrally and in the local communities - and also if one wishes to examine tensions between innovation and tradition.

The formation of a schools permanent physical form had a great effect on its pupils even though there were variations in this form. The combination of school attendance in rural areas in schoolhouses and the relocation of rural children's homes after the enclosure

(*landboreformerne*), meant that for many children the journey to school became longer. For nearly all children, school attendance became more regular and for a longer period of their childhood than had been the norm for previous generations. When one spoke of “going to school” in 1850 one referred to attendance at a particular building recognized as such by the whole local community.

The formation of teachers

For the supporters of school reforms during the entire period, the education of teachers was paramount if schools were to change.

In the beginning of the period, there was no formal teacher training and teachers were from widely varying backgrounds. Some were no more than boys who had left school after confirmation, some were old ladies who oversaw the education of the smaller children. Some were theologians including many deans who filled the role of teachers in their parishes. Others were clerks, artisans or even former soldiers. In some places the teacher’s pay was so poor that it was difficult to attract and maintain good teachers whilst in other areas the economic conditions were much better.

When the clergy or gentry expressed a wish to reform the school system, there was focus on the teacher from the very beginning, precisely because the majority of schools were dependant on one teacher and his teaching. The teacher *was* the school. To secure better teachers was therefore seen as the key to changing children’s education.

Previously there had been no specialized education for teachers, even though there had been informal training undertaken by an enthusiastic dean or pastor. The establishment of formal teacher training – teacher training colleges or seminaries (*lærerseminarier*) – from the 1780’s changed the role of teachers. In the beginning, the seminary educated teachers were the object of criticism. The clergy worried that the new teachers were not sufficiently humble and would be truculent and self-important towards their superior – the pastor. In addition, the seminarists and their more theoretical and pedagogic backgrounds became a target for those who feared that too much education would lead to dissatisfaction and social unrest.

Seminaries not only equipped young men with new knowledge and pedagogic methodology, they gave them a shared identity and education and formed friendships and a network. There were however still great differences within the teaching profession, regarding pay, social status and culturally between rural schools, those in market towns and the schools and private

schools of the cities. There was also a legion of teachers' wives, mothers and female teachers, not covered by the laws, but who made up a large part of the collective teaching profession.

Many new teachers made their mark on local society. They were often, alongside the pastor, the only members of the community with a higher education. It had been a vision of the reformers that the teacher in conjunction with the pastor should be an educator of and edifying force upon the population, a "People's Teacher" (*folkelærer*). Many teachers were active in local culture and the local church and many early local libraries were housed in the teacher's home. Their higher level of education in comparison to other parishioners and the contact they maintained through mutual societies and journals prompted some teachers to demand better conditions.

Education took form

Before 1780 the form of education was most often left up to the individual teacher. The choice of curriculum had primarily been decided by the motivations and funds of the parents.

During the period 1780 – 1850, there were experiments with a wide range of educational methods whilst continuity with traditional methods of education remained strong. The most fundamental change, whilst varying in tempo and extent everywhere, was the introduction of class-based education (*klasseundervisning*). Children were expected to attend punctually precisely because they were to be taught with their classmates. In rural areas, there were to be two classes for younger and older children respectively and in urban areas, often three. At the seminaries, teachers were instructed in how to utilise the blackboard and how to teach a whole class at once. Individual education did not vanish but the school class became a central feature when developing educational methods. Educational aids such as blackboards, tables and maps gained a supplementary role to the children's books.

In the 16- and 1700's, reading was the central subject which all children learned first, in order to study scripture. It remained so after 1814 according to the inspector corps. Throughout the period, two main tendencies can be discerned concerning the teaching of scripture which was compulsory for all children. The first was that children should learn the basics of religion thoroughly after they had received an introduction to reading and then build on this by learning the catechism, hymnbook and state-authorized religion book after. The other tendency emphasised the upbringing of children towards a more personal relationship with Christianity and used Bible stories and conversation as its most important tools. The tendencies were not sharply defined but were

instead formed through discussion between adherents of many different opinions and varied in their influence on educational ideals throughout the period.

Another constant tendency was the concentration on pedagogic methods, at least with respect to those promoted as ideals, found sensory education (*anskuelsesundervisning*) and comprehension exercises (*forstandsøvelser*); these were an attempt to make children think for themselves. Sensory education concentrating on the child's use of sense in understanding the world to gain knowledge appeared in several varieties firstly and notably in the philanthropic pedagogies of the 1770's and after. These were closely related to comprehension exercises and it can be difficult to delineate between the two types of teaching. The philosophy behind comprehension was that thinking consisted of several disciplines; memory, comparison, imagination and judgement and that all these areas required training.

Other teaching methods were more divisive. The monotorial system or the Bell-Lancaster method (*indbyrdes undervisning*) introduction was decreed in the teacher seminaries in the 1820's and in schools. At first there was much enthusiasm, not least because it was thought that it might overcome the problem of children at differing levels within the same class. Others criticised the model as being too mechanical and by the 1840's opposition to it had increased. The demands for the maintenance of the method were slowly softened but it was retained for remedial education in most instances. Teachers were used to the method, which was compulsory at the seminaries, and were often unable to teach in a different way.

The formation of pupils

Already with the law of 1739 it was asserted that children should primarily be regarded as schoolchildren. It was however in the period 1780-1850 that this principle was put into practice – it was the citizens of tomorrow who were to be formed from the schoolchildren of today.

The Danish society was a patriarchal one and this was reflected in the organization and curricula of the schools. Both before and after the school acts of 1814, there were schools for commoners, schools for burghers, pauper schools and privileged schools. There were differences between what a crofter's son and a young lady might learn. This influenced educational teaching, goals and equipment. Work played a greater role in schools for poor children than for the wealthy even though hard work was presented as a virtue with benefits for all. On the other hand a literary education was more common for the sons and daughters of the wealthy than for those lower down the scale. From the 1830's free "common" education in basic subjects (*friskole*) was separated in

the majority of market town schools from the privately financed extended education offered to the more prosperous classes (*borgerskole* or *betalingsskole*).

Of the common elements across gender and class, not the least was religious education and Christianity for children. In the legislation of 1814, it was stressed that it was a priority to make children “good and just people in accordance with the Evangelical Christian teachings” (*gode og retskafne mennesker i overensstemmelse med den evangelisk-lutherske lære*). Scriptural education did not merely consist of religious platitudes; it was intended to imprint moral and social values. In books and songs it was stressed that a good person should live an industrious, sober life, be cleanly and keep a clean home, obey authority and pay his dues punctually. This picture of discipline and duty was also part of religious education’s imprint of obedience and fidelity towards the established order of society and state.

At the beginning of the period, respect for ones superiors in general and fidelity to the absolute monarch as the father of the nation (*landsfader*) was pronounced. Gradually other ideals and interpretations were brought into play as a result of the wars of the period and new ideas relating to people and nation. In many schools, not least in Copenhagen, love for one’s country and mother tongue were increasingly highlighted in reading books and song lyrics.

Norms were not merely something contained in educational material. School as a practical and physical experience was at least as important for pupils. A fundamental aspect in all teaching was hierarchy, and the children learnt to submit to the teacher’s and the institution’s discipline. It was a principle which also marked the surrounding community. Children also experienced a gender separation in their school day where boys and girls sat separately and were not taught the same subjects. It was also given that some classes of children went to school together whilst others never met as their school day was completely different.

School authorities took form

A closer inspection and greater control over teachers’ educational methods and general behaviour, the attendance of pupils and management of the school’s economy and buildings characterises the period. This was not however synonymous with a uniformity of conditions from school to school or between the regions. The government was aware, at the centre, of the differences between the country’s regions. With the legislation of 1814, the state went one step further than in the 18th century as regards the assumption of responsibility for (and therefore influence over) the entire life of its schools.

The school laws reinforced the compulsory education (*undervisningspligt*) introduced in 1739. The developments over the following decades show that these decrees were perceived and enacted as an addition to compulsory attending school (*skolepligt*) for the majority. In some cases it was parents from deprived backgrounds who pointed to the paragraphs citing exceptions and in the 1830's and 1840's social upheaval, it was debated as to whether "forced schooling" (*skoletvang*) could be repealed so that parents could take a responsibility for their children's education. It was first with the free constitution of 1849 and the 1855 school act that the right of parents to decide where their children were educated was upheld and compulsory education (*undervisningspligt*) was made the central theme and principle.

One of the essential innovations of the 1814 legislation was that the whole organization of schooling and schools was changed and the responsibility for this passed partially into new hands. First and foremost a plan for each parish's public schools (*skoleplan*) was to be established by the parish's school board (*skolekommission*). Planning was compulsory but its form varied from parish to parish: Each parish gained therefore its own school plan and this contributed to the large regional and local variances.

In addition to this another innovation was to involve representatives for the local community in the school administration. In the 1780's, some of the most active landowners had tried to involve leading parishioners in order that they also should take responsibility for the local school. This was inspired by the system already in place for many decades in Norway and was necessitated by the changing role of landowners after the agrarian reforms in the 1780's and 1790's. In 1814, a new structure was introduced with local school boards with representatives of (the better part of) the rural population. Parishioners who now became members of these school commissions had all been to school and could read and write. They were given limited influence though this increased after the introduction of local self government in 1837 and 1841.

The involvement of the local population seems however to have made a difference for both the development of the local school and its legitimacy and connection to the community. At the same time, membership of the commissions conferred experience in school and local politics to new generations.

There was a good deal of continuity in the school commissions in that the clergy retained the most important roles as administrators and directors after 1814. Parish pastors were automatically chairmen of the commissions giving a considerable continuity with the preceding

centuries. The 1814 legislation resulted in a stronger, locally anchored administration and also in a more rigorous state and also clerical, inspection of schools and education.

Schools 1780 - 1850

In 1780 schools were a familiar phenomenon in the realms of the Danish King and, to varying extents, school was a part of most children's lives whether through peripatetic schooling (*omgangsskole*), village schools or those in the towns. By 1850 schools had assumed a more permanent form and were a greater part of children's lives.

The changes between 1780 and 1850 gave a greater conformity to schools. Teaching and the school was no longer the sole responsibility of an individual teacher; the school was now an institution, a building and a practice. Schools did not however become uniform despite increasing similarities. Peripatetic schools (*omgangsskole*) and home tutors did not disappear although their roles were diminished. There was still a wide gulf between schools for the wealthy such as those in Copenhagen and those for poor children in public care, just as the curricula offered to girls and boys in market towns often varied widely. The increasing conformity of schools and the simultaneous retention of variety is connected to the complex nature of the Danish state's composition. Five acts were required in 1814 to cover the Danish king's kingdom and duchies with their varied populations. In addition to this further innovations were required for the monarchy's farther flung territories. The increasing desire of the absolute monarchy to take responsibility for children's schooling did make its mark. The goal was to bring up good Christians and "useful citizens for the State".

The acts of 1814 and all their regulations and decrees can be seen to have been imposed from above and from the centre: The absolutist government formed and promulgated the laws whilst the central administration implemented them. At the same time, the schools were run and financed from below: The people and minor officials in individual provostries, parishes and counties had themselves to find the funds for the running of the local schools, to find suitable teachers, buildings and books. Much was controlled from the centre and there was not always free choice in the matter. Sometimes the decisions taken locally gave too much flexibility and therefore necessitated rule changes from the centre. This was particularly pertinent in relation to when and for how long children should attend school. The laws of 1814 had intended that children should attend school for a half day on each weekday for some years so that teaching could take a class-based

form. This was incompatible however with the demands of agriculture. Therefore, attendance every other day had to be promptly allowed.

Schools had received a framework by the government of which had to be worked out locally. It was not least here that many and varied parties left their mark from the provost and pastor to the parish clerk, teacher and parents at each school. In this way the overall picture of schools in the country was a colourful tapestry. In reality there were nearly as many school acts as there were schools.