

Paper for the ESSHC Conference in Valencia, April 1, 2016

The Danish School Acts of 1814 and the Emergence of Mass Schooling in Denmark

This paper treats the impact of the Danish Schools Acts of 1814 and the emergence of mass schooling in Denmark in the 19th century. That all children in the Danish realms in principle were schoolchildren had been established already in the 1730s. But in the first part of the 19th century, the absolutist state sought the principle seriously implemented. In 1814, the Danish King Frederik VI enacted a set of schools laws. The acts of 1814 set out the framework for children's education in the Danish monarchy, but the laws did not create schools; they primarily regulated diversity and confirmed an already ongoing process. Although schools came to resemble each other more, there were still large variations. Economy, politics, chances, and local enthusiasm as well as resistance had an impact on the results. Therefore, there was not a single Danish school system in 1850, but many thousands schools systems, one for each parish and town.

1. Introduction

In my lecture, I will highlight and analyse the impact of the 1814 schools acts and thereby the emergence of mass schooling in Denmark in the 19th century. Both the general school reforms as well as the specific implementations during the period 1780-1850 are analysed in order to explain how school and schooling were shaped. To appreciate these changes and also the contexts which were relevant in the period 1780-1850, I will use five connected narratives to illustrate the concrete conditions affecting the daily life of schooling.¹

2. The school acts of 1814

Schooling in Denmark in the 1850's or 1890's was in many ways similar to the situation before the first school reforms in the 1780's and 1790's. This was due to the fact that the Danish society throughout the period was an agrarian society. Denmark also continued to be a patriarchal society with big differences between rich and poor, men and women. There were, however, major shifts in

¹ This paper is based on: Larsen, Christian, Erik Nørr & Pernille Sonne, *Da skolen tog form. 1780-1850*. Volume 2 of Ning de Coninck-Smith & Charlotte Appel (eds), 'Dansk skolehistorie – hverdag, vilkår og visioner gennem 500 år' (Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2013). - The book is based on a large amount of printed and unprinted materials; see Larsen et al. (2013), 357-401, for a more detailed description. The unprinted material are, among others, archives from the *Danske Kancelli*, school directors, school boards and schools, reverends, teacher training colleges, estates, police and reformatories. Among the printed material are contemporary literature and debates, memories and textbooks, as well as Danish and international literature.

the social structures in the first half of the 19th century, which influenced on the development of the Danish schools.

Some of the most significant changes were related to the agrarian reforms, which introduced new crops, cultivation methods and farmers' responsibility for their own plots. This meant the emergence of a stronger and more independent farmer class with new needs and expectations of schooling for their children. The subsequent termination of the landowners as local representatives for the state was also crucial to the rescheduled administration of schools in rural communities. Agricultural reforms also led to significant productivity gains and thus better nutritional status and further population growth. As a consequence the local school authorities have to provide rooms for more children.

The economy was not characterized by sheer growth. The state went bankrupt in 1813, and shortly after, an agricultural crisis with low prices on the farmers' crops began. It gave great challenges for the implementation of the newly adopted school acts of 1814 as the farmers could not pay school taxes. The economic cycle turned in the 1830s. With the better times for both commerce and crafts the pressure increased from the better-off layers of cities to ensure a better and more advanced schooling for their children.

The Enlightenment's optimistic believe in human potential and the desire for secure better education for the population, especially through schools, was challenged by more conservative forces. The period also includes shifts from a cult of patriotic virtues and fidelity towards the King within the framework of a composite Oldenburg monarchy to an increasing focus on the love of the mother tongue (*modersmål*) and the motherland (*fædreland*) in a more narrow national sense.

These trends were closely linked to the political changes of this period. The Danish kings were from 1660 and until 1848 autocratic rulers and it gave considerable continuity. But there were many changes in the autocratic state apparatus, including major changes of the administrative structures. Schooling was one of several areas – beside poor relief – where the state increasingly took on overall responsibility, while local administration expanded and was adjusted in the parishes. Furthermore, groups of citizens and more prosperous peasants took increasingly part in administration of and debate on school and community during the 1830's and especially the 1840's – in the printed public debate, the advisory assemblies (*rådgivende stænderforsamlinger*) and not least in the local administration.

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 as the composite monarchy necessitated a differentiated legislation. Three of these acts set the standards for schools in different parts of in the Kingdom of Denmark: One concerned the rural districts, another market towns and the third the capital of Copenhagen. Two other acts concerned the Jews within the Danish Kingdom and the Danish king's Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein.

Several key elements of the laws of 1814 had their roots in the reform period of the 1780's and 1790's with its debates, the 1789 Great School Commission and the 1806 Provisional School Act for the islands of Zealand, Lolland-Falster and Funen. 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 the state should take responsibility for the country's public school system. Experiences gained in earlier reforms of private and gentry's schools became central to the new thoughts concerning schools.

However, the laws of 1814 cannot simply be understood as late or delayed results of the foresaid reform period. Other agendas had emerged over the years. These concerned the desire of tackling 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 important parts 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. As mentioned before, 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 Danish ministry of justice, church and education, *Danske Kancelli*, 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 considered perfectly 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' 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.

Building schoolhouses

It was a growing expectation that a school was a solid physical place. The school acts implied that spacious new schoolhouses should be built, which could accommodate the school district's

children, but also contained an appropriate residence for the teacher and his family. There had also to be purchased new school furniture. The *Danske Kancelli* issued guidelines for how to construct a good school building and school boards were responsible for implementing the guidelines. But the demands met in many places resistance, and school boards succeeded in delaying building projects for several years.

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. A survey made by the *Danske Kancelli* in 1836 showed that 605 new rural schools had been built since 1814, along with 305 new classrooms and 857 expansions to existing schools. As a result, a quarter of schools were newly built but the vast majority still stemmed from the 1700s. The construction costs amounted to a total cost of 859.000 *Rigsbankdaler (rbd)* or what corresponded to nearly two years of elementary school expenses. On average, there had been used 375 *rbd* per school; however, it ranged from 657 *rbd* on the island of Funen with good and rich soils to 199 *rbd* in the meagre heathlands of West Jutland.

Instrumental in the emerging uniformity of schoolhouses was that the acts of 1814 were followed by architects' sketches of so called model schools (*modeltegning for mønsterskole*) which were sent out all over the country by the government during the 1820's. Schoolhouses all over the country began to resemble each other but still with local variations. School buildings were not only a question of economy, but also depending on the number of pupils and the local building traditions. Disagreement about the scope and method of construction was also common. Was it, for example, really necessary to build a new-fangled gymnastic facility? Negotiations over the layout of a school building, both exterior and interior, is central to the understanding of 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.

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.

Educating new teachers

When the clergy or gentry expressed a wish to reform the school system, focus lay on the teacher from the very beginning, precisely because the majority of schools were dependant on one single 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 from the 1780's onwards changed the role of teachers. In the German-speaking parts of Europe, state and church had early in the 1700's created a new type of specialized teacher training: teacher training colleges or seminaries (*lærerseminarier*). The idea came to Holstein, a duchy in the Danish realms, and the idea of a special education was formulated in legislation from 1747. The plans were long in preparation, but in 1781, a state seminary opened in Kiel, inspired by the school thoughts of German Philantropist F.E. von Rochow. In Copenhagen, Blaagaard State College opened in 1791. The Danish State had thus been given a new type of institution.

Since 1790, the old parish clerk offices had been replaced with college-educated teachers when the local clerks died. Almost three decades passed before the last of them passed away. And in the aftermath of the state bankruptcy, it was somewhat difficult to attract college-educated teachers for poorly paid offices. In 1850, 20% of rural teachers were still without a formal education.

The new seminaries not only equipped young men with new knowledge and pedagogic methodology. They also 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 culture 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 literary 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.

Education of body, mind, and spirit

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 though 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 at certain hours because they were to be taught together with classmates of equal ages and educational level. 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 one. 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 legislation of 1814, the King instructed the teachers to educate the children so they would become good Christians, and useful citizens of the State. This applied both to the spirits, the minds and the bodies of the children. The children were given spiritual 'Bildung' (*dannelselse*) in Religion. In the school acts, it was stressed that it was a priority to make children 'good and just people in accordance with the Evangelical Christian teachings'. Therefore, Religion remained the most important subject in the school curriculum. Furthermore, Religion played a major part in almost all other subjects where upbringing within a Christian conception of the world was emphasized.

In order for the children to be shaped in this way, they had to be formed into pupils. In the rural schools children were frequently referred to as 'raw', 'immoral' or even 'adulterous'. The 'raw' children had to be corrected so that they could perform the role of being pupils. They had to

learn to be schoolchildren, and to the role heard a great deal of things: cleanliness and good behaviour, diligence and patriotic sentiment. The education of becoming a pupil and a citizen was also organized in large and small rituals including, e.g., daily prayers, physical chastisement or celebration of the King's birthday. The rituals helped to make coherence between schooling, everyday school life and the school as an institution – and thus defining what school meant for children and teachers, for parents and society.

Although parents, teachers, priests and masters tried strenuously to shape the children according to their own ideals, the result was not given in advance. The individual child and groups of children found ways to circumvent the attempts to discipline them and instead to set their own agenda.

Education for rich and poor, girls and boys

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. Labour 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 social scale.

In the first 25 years after the proclamation of the school act for the market towns, the public schools were relatively small. In almost all market towns various private schools and private education represented an alternative to the public school. Most of the education above public school level was handled by private. As the agricultural crisis petered out and a stronger economic and business development extended to the market towns in 1830's, a reform of the market town schools was once more put on the agenda.

A mantra of the discussion was 'exudation' [ek-s(y)ü-'dā-shən]. Children from the middle-class should not attend school along with working class children. Most of the larger towns were in favour of the 'exudation', whilst the smaller towns opposed. The numbers of pupils in their schools were so low that a split would mean insurmountable costs. In the larger market towns, there was a clear demand that pupils, who would be merchants, manufacturers, artisans etc., had to learn more than common people, but also that the 'finer' children should not attend school with working class children. Characteristic was the opinion of the Aalborg school board: the bourgeoisie did not want their children to go to a school that was crowded 'with ragged and unfair children of 'raw' parents'. The words 'separation' and 'exudation' had thus a positive value.

During the 1830's and 1840's changes were made in the market town schools. The public school's free education was in to-thirds of the market towns divided into a school with no fees and with education in basic subjects (*friskole*) for the lower classes and a school with fees and extended education offered to the more prosperous parents (*borgerskole* or *betalingsskole*). Especially in the medium and large market towns public schools with fees were established whilst the small towns continued with having only one school.

Supervision and autonomy in local government

One of the essential innovations of the 1814 legislation was that the whole organization of schooling and schools changed and that the responsibility for this passed partially into new hands. A new administrative structure was introduced with local school boards (*skolekommissioner*) with representatives of (the social superior part of) the rural population. In the 1780's, some of the most active landowners had tried to involve leading parishioners to make them take responsibility for the local school. In Denmark, the new system was necessitated by the changing role of landowners after agrarian reforms in the 1780's and 1790's and the introduction of freehold.

In all school boards there were to be two 'school principals' (*skoleforstandere*) appointed by the county school directors from the parishioners. Those parishioners who now became members of these school boards had all been to school and could read and write. The involvement of the local population seems 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. They were granted limited influence though this did increase after the introduction of local self-government in 1837 and 1841.

A plan for each parish's public schools (*skoleplan*) was to be established by the parish's school board and approved by the ministry (*Danske Kancelli*). Planning was compulsory but its form varied. Therefore, each parish gained its own school plan which contributed to the large regional and local variances. On the islands, where the Provisional School Act of 1806 had been in force, already one-third of rural parishes had by 1814 an approved plan and by 1820 almost half of all parishes. The parishes in Jutland followed in the years thereafter. However, the economic downturn from 1813 meant that approval of school plans from Jutland fell, and it was first from around 1830 that the preparation of plans was revived as the economic trends improved for the country's main business, agriculture.

The school acts of 1814 reinforced compulsory education (*undervisningspligt*, i.e. a duty to receive education) introduced in 1739. The developments over the following decades show that these laws were perceived and enacted as compulsory attending school (*skolepligt*, i.e. a duty to go to a school) for the majority, i.e. children of peasants and labourers. One of the key tasks for the newly established school boards was therefore to make sure that the children went to school on regular base. Regularly schooling was met with opposition from parents and masters who prioritized children's and domestics' work more than frequent schooling. They had to get used to that their children and domestics' schooling was in principle now governed by the acts, and that others – teachers, pastors and school boards – had the right and duty to intervene.

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. With the free constitution of 1849 and the 1855 School Act the right of parents to decide where their children should be educated was upheld and compulsory education (*undervisningspligt*) was made the central theme and principle.

3. Conclusion

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 played a bigger role in 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 role was diminished. A wide gulf between schools for the wealthy such as those in Copenhagen and those for poor children in public care still existed, 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 funding for the running of local schools, to find suitable teachers, buildings as well as books. Much was controlled from the centre and there was not always a free choice in the matter. Sometimes decisions taken locally gave too much flexibility and therefore necessitated a change of rules 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 second day had to be promptly allowed.

Schools received a framework from the government which had to be filled 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 with the local school plans there were nearly as many school acts as there were schools.

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in the 18th and 19th century Denmark, amongst them: Christian Larsen (ed.), 'Realskolen gennem 200 år – kundskaber og erhvervsforberedelse' [A History of Primary and Lower Secondary Schools in Denmark] I-II, 2010, and Christian Larsen, Erik Nørr & Pernille Sonne: 'Da skolen tog form. 1780-1850'. [When Schools Were Shaped: 1780 – 1850], 2013, 432 pp. - volume 2 of N. de Coninck-Smith & C. Appel (eds.), 'Dansk skolehistorie – hverdag, vilkår og visioner gennem 500 år'.