

Paper for the ESSHC Conference in Belfast, April 5, 2018

Good and Righteous People and Useful Citizens of the State: The Danish 1814 School Acts

This paper treats the impact of the Danish Schools Acts of 1814 and the emergence of mass schooling in Denmark in the 19th century. In 1814, the Danish King, Frederik VI, enacted a set of schools laws: one for the village schools, one for the market town schools, one for Copenhagen, one for the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein and one for Jews. The legislation was a response to the agrarian reforms that created a new, more enlightened and more independent peasant, and to tackle the poor and uneducated children in urban areas. Five Acts were required to cover the Danish king's realms with their varied populations, administrative structure and local conditions. Therefore, the government chose a set of Acts adjusted to the local context to secure mass schooling for the vast majority of children and a sort of educational uniformity.

1. Introduction

In Denmark, it had already been established in the 1730s that all children in the King's realms in principle were schoolchildren.¹ In the countryside, where 80% of the population lived, schools were regulated by the 1739 school legislation of the absolute King Christian VI of Denmark-Norway. The legislation made it obligatory for all children to attend school and learn Christianity and reading in order to be good Christians and loyal subjects. If the parents paid, the children could also be taught writing and calculating.

¹ This paper is based on my article to an upcoming book on schools acts, edited by Johannes Westberg, Lukas Boser and Ingrid Brühwiler. See also Christian Larsen, "A Diversity of Schools: The Danish School Acts of 1814 and the Emergence of Mass Schooling in Denmark", in *Nordic Journal of Educational History*, vol. 4 (2017), pp. 3–28.

In the first part of the 19th century, the absolutist state sought to seriously implement the principle of all children being schoolchildren. In 1814, the Danish King, Frederik VI, enacted school legislation in order to regulate the existing organisation of mass schooling within his realms and territories.

In this paper, I will trace the long route from the early reforms on noble estates in the 1780s, to the promulgation and implementation of the more conservative 1814 School Acts. Then, I will highlight the 1830s and 1840's perception of the role of the school. Finally, I look at the consequences of the Acts by a status of their implementation in the 1850s.

2. Agricultural and school reforms

Some of the most significant changes, in the period 1780–1850, were related to the agrarian reforms in the latter part of the 18th century. A long-term population growth and increased demand for food, combined with new knowledge of how to increase agricultural production, led to agricultural reforms.

In the 18th century, the Danish King ruled over the Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, north of Hamburg. The Duchies were important for the ideas that played a great role in the development of Danish society. Leading government officials recruited intellectuals and pedagogues to Denmark from the Duchies and the northern part of Germany, the majority being German natives with cosmopolitan views. Basedow, the founder of the Philanthropic movement, was in the service of the Danish King 1753–67 and the first teacher training college was founded in the Duchy of Holstein in 1781.

In the 1780s and 1790s, a group of Danish noble landlords of German descent launched a series of school reforms. Amongst others, this comprised the Finance Minister, Count von Schimmelmann, his brother-in-law, Count Ludwig Reventlow and his brother Count Christian Reventlow. The Reventlow brothers had attended Basedow's lectures and Ludvig Reventlow had read the German landowner von Rochow's Philanthropic writings. The landowners were inspired by the German Cameralism prioritising agriculture as the country's primary profession and emphasising the economic and moral value of labour. Peasants would be motivated to introduce new tools, crops and cultivation methods, thus increasing production and revenue. However, if the peasants were to fulfil this new role, it was necessary to ensure better schooling and enlightenment to all, thereby setting

them free and making them citizens of the state. Thus, land reforms and school reforms were connected.

In 1789, the Danish government established the Great School Commission to address the need for new, nationwide school reforms. After a decade and internal disagreements, the commission's proposals, written by Christian Reventlow, were presented to the government in 1799. Reventlow's draft was based on his own estate school order, borrowed from his brother. This school order was again borrowed from von Rochow but translated into a Danish context.

The government endorsed a state patriotic identity, regarding all inhabitants as Danish subjects of the King, whether Danish, Norwegian or German by birth or language. The schools' state patriotic role was inscribed in the preamble to the 1799 draft: schooling was to turn the peasant youths firstly into righteous Christians, as the absolute constitution obliged the King to uphold Lutheran Christianity as state religion and secondly, good citizens and loyal subjects of the King. The preamble thus expressed dominant cultural convictions about the existing social and political order in a Lutheran, absolute monarchy.

3. The 1814 School Acts

The final School Acts were enacted in 1814, 25 years after the establishment of the Great School Commission. Several key elements of the Acts had their roots in the reform period. However, the 1814 agenda differed from the optimistic 1780s and 1790s. The Enlightenment's optimism had given way to a more conservative current, influenced, amongst other factors, by revolutionary France and Denmark's participation in the Napoleonic wars. In 1805, the Ministry of Justice, Church and Education had rejected the introduction of teaching history, geography, natural science, natural history and mechanics as separate subjects, with the reasoning "It is to be feared that by going too far in these matters one might remove the peasant from his real occupation."

All children had to be educated but there were different methods of education according to social position and place of residence. Therefore, five School Acts were passed in 1814, instead of a single School Act, setting the standards for schools in different parts of the country. One concerned the Danish rural districts, another the Danish market towns and the third, the capital, Copenhagen. Two

other Acts concerned the Jews within the Danish Kingdom and the Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein.

The five School Acts

The Act, concerning the Danish rural districts and market towns, referred only to peasants and labourers. The sons and daughters of the clergy, civil servants, wealthy landowners or manufacturers could not be satisfied with the common standard of education; they were expected to attain a higher level. It would also be unthinkable that the two groups of children should share the same school and daily life.

The twin goals of education in the rural districts and in the market towns were creating “good and righteous people in accordance with the Protestant-Lutheran teachings, as well as provide them with knowledge and skills necessary for them to become useful citizens in the state.” The 1799 draft’s phrases regarding “common sense” and “happy human beings” were gone and focus lay on the school’s state patriotic role on bringing up good Christians and loyal subjects. Christianity was the foundation for the state and for society and its central role was reflected in the hierarchy of school subjects, thereby expressing the cultural values: religion, writing, reading and arithmetic. As an innovation, peasant boys were to learn gymnastics, partly to prepare them for their time as conscripts.

The local school administration

One of the essential innovations of the 1814 legislation was that the whole organisation of schooling and schools changed. A new administrative, decentralised structure was introduced with local school boards that laid a good foundation for the local implementation of the Acts in a period where the state could play only a minor role, and the pastor being the one of the few civil servants in the parish. With the pastor being the permanent Chair of the school board, as well as the daily leader of the schools, the church’s connection to the school was underlined.

A plan for the public schools was to be established by the school board and approved by the ministry. The plan was to include information on the school districts’ size and the number of schools, the teachers who were to conduct the education and their salaries, as well as how the expenses of the schools had to be paid. Planning was compulsory in order for the government to

control the implementation process but its form varied locally. Therefore, each parish gained its own school plan that contributed to the large regional and local variances.

Schoolhouses

One of the other main tasks for the school boards was providing the parish with one or more schoolhouses.

According to the 1814 Acts for Denmark, the school room – provided by the school board – was to be spacious. The school building would also provide the teacher with a “decent room for themselves and family as well as sufficient space for two cows and six sheep, to retain his feed and wood and the procreation from the school’s soils.”

Architects’ sketches of so-called model schools followed the Act’s guidelines in 1829, issued by the ministry as an inspiration for the school boards when building new establishments. The sketches were inspired by schools built on some Crown estates in the 1790s, again resembling the first Crown estate school buildings from the 1720s. Tradition and borrowing thus played an important role.

The teachers

As the nobility and others expressed a wish to reform the school organisation, their focus lay on the teacher: the majority of schools were dependent on one single teacher and his teaching. The education of primary level teachers was therefore paramount if schools were to change and the school reform ideals were to be implemented throughout all parts of the realms.

Before the school reforms, there had been no specialised education for teachers, even though there had been informal training undertaken by a dean or pastor. The establishment of formal teacher training from the 1780s onwards changed teachers’ role.

In 1781, a state seminary opened in the city of Kiel, in the Duchy of Holstein, based on the school thoughts borrowed from von Rochow. In the following decades, different models of teacher training colleges emerged.

At there was a great difference between the teacher training colleges, the government wanted common rules for the colleges, resulting in the 1818 teacher training college statute. The colleges were to train a religious, modest, practical and thrifty teacher. The future teacher should become accustomed to simplicity in everyday life, so his lifestyle suited the conditions of a teacher in a rural school amongst (other) peasants. The three-year general education should enable the teacher to teach, of course, but also to act as a people's teacher by communicating his knowledge for the benefit of the residents of the school district.

4. The contemporary perception of the School Acts

In the wake of the 1830 revolutions, the Danish absolute king set up four advisory assemblies in 1831, with the right to comment on new essential laws, to bring cases for discussion or raise inquiry debates. Thereby, political institution was established as a platform for discussing social conditions, including school matters, as the members were the school's "customers".

Members from the market towns demanded the creation of secondary schools by transforming existing grammar schools to secondary schools and partly setting up a special department of the public school with fees for middle-class children whose parents preferred an advanced training. During the 1830s and 1840s, the public school's free education was divided into a school with no fees and with education in basic subjects for the lower classes, and a school with fees and extended education offered to the more prosperous parents.

In the countryside, the ministry had to withdraw the 1829 model sketches for school buildings in part. The assembly members (and tax payers) criticised the high construction costs, which they believed were caused by the ministry's rules. A member, who represented custom interests among peasants, said that the School Acts had not been as successful as expected. In his opinion, it would be much better if the parents had the right to teach their own children or hire a private teacher. In his opinion, forced schooling was the cause of many problems.

At the same time, there were Pietistic-inspired revivals in Jutland in the 1820s and 1830s. They kept their children from attending school, thereby challenging the school's monopoly on religious education. The government decided that the followers were given the responsibility of their

children's religious education and to use the old textbook. In this way, the break with the state church became less prominent because the permission was restricted only to religion.

In 1849, a free constitution was enacted. In contrast to many other countries, the new Danish constitution did not lead to a new School Act. The Danish constitutional assembly did, however, discuss who was to be in charge of educating the children: the parents, as proposed by the Liberals, or the state. Members supporting the state-view thought that the obligation for peasants and the lower classes to go to school could not be abolished as the state was compelled to ensure that peasant and working class children received an education. The constitution therefore guaranteed the right to free education for children whose parents could not afford to hire a private teacher.

5. The consequences of the School Acts – status in the 1850s

Several decades passed before the 1814 School Acts were implemented, being delayed by the Napoleonic wars (1807–14), the state bankruptcy of 1813 and an agricultural crisis in the 1820s.

In the middle of the 1850s, there were 2,520 rural schools in Denmark with 835 new schools having been established since 1814. Schoolhouses all over the country began to resemble each other but still had local variations, due to the local economy and building traditions.

All children had to go to school and a survey from 1857/67 showed that 97% of all children aged between 7 and 14 in rural districts were enrolled. Even though almost all children went to school on a regular basis, the days and hours spent in school varied considerably. First, the number of school days was not consistent throughout Denmark. The local school boards were entitled to make changes in the prescribed school hours. In addition, sowing, harvest and ploughing vacations, church holidays, teachers' illness and poor weather meant that the actual number of school days was somewhat less.

Secondly, absenteeism was a nationwide problem throughout the 19th century. Schooling was frequently met with opposition by parents and masters who prioritised children's and domestics' work over regular schooling. An 1857 survey stated that every child was absent 14.7 days a year (7%) from school without a legal reason. If children missed school without a legitimate reason, the school board had to impose a fine per day. However, within the boards, where parents and

employers were represented, there was no clear support to enforce regular schooling and only half of the boards imposed fines.

Absenteeism influenced the literacy rates in Denmark. The School Acts' demand for learning to write was gradually met with interest and demand from the population, due to its requirement in various sectors of society, including the municipal councils from 1837/41. Reports on the conscripts' reading and writing abilities tell us about such boys. An 1859–60 report shows that the majority could read and write, to varying degrees.

To some extent, such reading and writing abilities also depended on the teacher. As the old parish clerks passed away, only college-educated teachers could replace them but it took almost three decades before the last of the clerks died. In the aftermath of the state bankruptcy, it was difficult to attract college-educated teachers to poorly paid offices.

6. Conclusion

The 1814 legislation was a response to the agrarian reforms creating a new, more enlightened and more independent peasant. The government tried to take overall responsibility for school organisation and promoting uniformity in the educational field. Every Danish child had to go to school, and according to the School Acts, all children were supposed to learn the same things in order to be good Christians and loyal subjects, whether living in villages, in small fishing villages or in market towns.

However, the government had to accept a diversity of schools. There were great social, geographical and economic differences and various administrative structures within the King's realms. Therefore, the King had to pass five School Acts to fulfil the government's wish to regulate this range and create educational uniformity, setting different standards for each group of subjects.

These differences reflected variations in the normative condition and practice of schooling prior to state intervention. Governments chose different strategies more likely to work or to be accepted in a local context. In Denmark, the government chose five sets of Acts that were adjusted to the local context to secure mass schooling for the vast majority of children. Thus, Danish schools received a

governmental framework that had to be filled locally in a decentralised school organisation, resulting in nearly as many School Acts as there were school boards.

Christian Larsen (b. 1974) is PhD, senior researcher and archivist at The Danish National Archives in Copenhagen. In his research, he has concentrated on primary schooling, private schooling and teachers training in 18th and 19th century Denmark. He has written and edited several works, 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'.