

Togetherness and the dual school system

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In order to understand the history of Danish schools, and not least of the Danish free schools, it is important to remember that, from the Middle Ages through to the 1849 Constitution, Denmark was an estate society. Even though the estate system was breaking up by then, the population remained divided into four estates: the aristocracy, the clergy, the bourgeoisie and the peasantry, each of which had its own function and its own special rights and duties. There was no equality before the law, since each estate had its own different rights and duties. The estate system was bound together by a common king and a common religion. The crown and the altar made up the two central symbols of the social order and provided the framework for a form of national homogeneity.

In the estate system the aristocracy and the clergy occupied a privileged status of their own and saw themselves as free, in contrast to the third and fourth estates, the bourgeoisie and the peasantry, who were known as 'not free and ignoble'. The aristocrat and the churchman were elevated far above these estates. As far back as we can go, according to the Danish priest Hans Peter Kofoed-Hansen in *Et folk – folket (One people – the people)* (1869), "the nobility and the clergy have themselves most respectfully declined the honour of being counted as being of 'the people'". It was understandable enough that they should decline, for the people was a term used particularly of commoners, or in other words primarily of the peasant estate, who made up the great majority of the population and who had no privileges.¹ Privileges such as freedom from paying taxes, freedom from military service and the right to wear a wig were all reserved for the privileged estates.

For N.F.S. Grundtvig, one of the prime movers behind the Danish constitution, when the change came from absolutism to a constitutional monarchy in 1849, the main issue was not the shift of power from absolutist to constitutional monarch but the move from estate to people.² He even called the estate system a cast system. In the national assembly that brought about the constitution, he articulated the change from estate to people as being a principle that was a core constituent of society. In 1849 he proclaimed, "The era of estates behind us; now the time of the *folk* (people) will come". The time of the people was Grundtvig's vision of a society in which the various estates were assembled into a single *folk*. To promote the time of the people required popular enlightenment with the aim of getting the common man to see himself as something other and more than just a common man. Instead of seeing himself as the lowest estate in society, the common man was to see himself as belonging to a Danish *folk*.

The estate structure also characterised the school system. Schools were never just schools but always schools for certain particular children, depending on who they were and which estate they belonged to. We have never had compulsory schooling for everyone. The well-off, who could and would pay for their children's education, were subject only to the requirement to *educate* their children, not to send them to school. After the 1814 Act, compulsory schooling was only for common people and for the less well-off. But in 1851,

¹ Indeed, the Danish word *pøbel*, which etymologically rubs shoulders with 'people', denotes the mob or underclass.

² The term 'folk' is rendered here as 'people' but English has no real equivalent. The same applies to other terms used in this area of Danish culture – *fællesskab* (togetherness), or *dannelse* (cultivation of character)

Christen Kold exploited the same opportunity that was available to the upper classes and opened a free school in Dalby on the island of Funen, the first of Kold's free schools.

The following year, Kold's protégé, the priest Ludvig Daniel Hass, put a proposal before parliament that the legal requirement linking church confirmation and school attendance should be dissolved. D.G. Monrad, later to become prime minister, rejected the proposal, but the great spokesman for supporters of the peasantry, A.F. Tschering, supported the proposal by stressing that the time had now come when the peasant was able to say: "I have now subjected myself to compulsory schooling for as long as was required, and now I and my child are free to decide for ourselves." (Folketingstidende 1852, col. 691). This proposal gave rise to a debate and a lengthy process, the result of which was the Free School Act of 2nd May 1855, which was appended to the Constitution in 1915.

The Free School Act meant that compulsory *school* was abolished for commoners and replaced with compulsory *education*. The peasant estate had won for itself the same rights as the aristocracy and the clergy had always had, namely the opportunity to manage and finance their children's education themselves. The only condition was that, at the 6-monthly examinations in state schools, children should demonstrate that they possessed "the same level of knowledge and skill in the prescribed teaching topics" as was required of children in state schools. This legislation contributed to the founding of a whole range of free school right across the country during the years that followed.

In the countryside, free schools in the Christen Kold model became the spearhead for a major shift in consciousness: from common people to *folk*. Kold's form of teaching was a pedagogy of awakening, shot through with the battle cry of religious evangelism: Awake! You must change your life! And that is bit by bit what common people did. They gradually acquired a way of living that embraced *folk* and nation; they created new forms of social togetherness and solidarity, which were not based on birth, estate, occupation or local affiliation. And, as they increasingly adopted an identity moulded around *folk* and nation, their ancient identity as an estate eroded. In this way Koldian free schools contributed to giving the notion of *folk* a new meaning. A term that had once been used of society's lowest estate came to designate a whole and homogenous people, the Danish *folk*.

What made up the driving force behind the establishment of the dual school system that we have in Denmark was, in other words, a new way of understanding togetherness, as a national community of the people.

Freedom with no but's

For decades the Danish free school tradition has enjoyed broad political support, even from the Social Democrats, which has not been the case in the same way with equivalent parties in Norway and Sweden. In what follows I have selected three striking statements, which illustrate how strong the support for the dual school system has been in Denmark.

After the Social Democrats took power with the Social-Liberal party in 1929, the Social Democratic Minister for Education, Frederik Borgbjerg, declared that he was in favour of "a communal state school" but that he had no desire to see "a state monopoly" in schools. There had to be space for free schools alongside state schools. "I do not want a stiff, uniform national state school. I want there to be room for individuality, for new movement". (Rigsdagstidende 1930-31, col.1309).

Borgbjerg had no difficulty in understanding that the daily newspaper *Socialdemokraten* (*The Social Democrat*) might find it strange in 1933 that Niels Bukh, the principal at Ollerup Gymnastic High School, continued to receive state funding for his school after he had declared that same year, “if I was 20 years younger I would take upon myself in Denmark the task that Hitler has accomplished in Germany”. However, according to Borgbjerg, Niels Bukh’s opinions were no concern of the state. “A man has the right to be an anarchist and to demand the abolition of the state” as long as he does not make use of “*illegal means to carry out his demands to that effect* (...) If Niels Bukh puts himself at the head of his followers and storms Copenhagen, well, then the state has to take action, but not before.” (Hans Bonde: *Niels Bukh. En politisk-ideologisk biografi* 2001:273).

The Danish Liberal party has kept a particularly close eye on the Free Schools Act. For example, during the so-called indoctrination debate in parliament in 1974, the Liberals’ Minister for Education, Tove Nielsen, maintained that a teacher who was not able to refrain from indoctrinating pupils in a state school could instead teach at one of Denmark’s free schools, a viewpoint supported by the Conservative party spokesman. If people wanted to proselytize, they should choose to teach at a free school not a state school (Ellen Nørgaard: *Indoktrinering i folkeskolen* 2008:58, 71, 72). Their argument was based on a clear distinction between the public school and ‘schools of opinion’. No indoctrination in state schools, but probably in the free schools.

According to K.E. Larsen, director of popular education, Bertel Haarder, who became Minister for Education in 1982, regarded the Directorate for Popular Education “as a somewhat figurative directorate as far as management was concerned, for we were simply there to serve freedom. And this meant that our position was as he described it in a speech at Bording Free School: ‘Now the caretaker is going to speak, for my right to say anything here is on a par with the caretaker’s. I do not manage this school. You do’. (“Samtale med tidl. Undervisningsdirektør K.E. Larsen” (“Conversation with former Director of Education K.E. Larsen”), *Uddannelseshistorie* 1997:15). The perception of freedom expressed here by Haarder is known as ‘*freedom with no but’s*’.

Bertel Haarder saw himself as someone who was continuing the liberal tradition of Danish educational legislation, as can be seen in the way he approached Tvind’s scholastic empire. Even though Haarder was strongly opposed to the *attitudes* of Tvind teachers, he was just as strong in his defence of the right of Tvind schools to exist, as long as their *actions* did not contravene the law.

The tradition of Danish free schools, which have enjoyed such wide political support since their inception, has been regarded as one we Danes have good reason to be proud of. It has been seen as an expression of a particular Danish culture that is built upon trust and open-mindedness.

From homogeneity to diversity

The schools movement initiated by Kold, which received financial support from 1899, laid the foundation for the other private schools that exist in today’s Denmark. In 2016 there are close to 600,000 children attending state schools compared with around 117,000 in free schools. There are 1,388 state schools against 545 free schools and about 250 *efterskoler* or one-year boarding free schools for teenagers.

The legal basis for these schools is to be found in §76 of the Constitution, which reads: “Parents or guardians who themselves ensure that their children receive an education

that can measure up to the demands normally made of the state school are not bound to have their children instructed at a state school.”

In 2016 the free schools are organised into seven associations:

- The German Schools and Language Association with about 15 schools and 1400 pupils
- The Association for Private Gymnasiums with 21 schools
- The Danish Free Schools Association (est. 1886) with 340 schools and about 47,000 pupils
- Of these about 60 schools with 10,000 pupils are known as Lilleskoler or Small Schools (est. 1949)
- Denmark’s Private Schools Association (est. 1891) with 130 schools and about 56,000 pupils
- Of these 22 schools come under the Association for Catholic Schools (est. 1965)
- The Association for Christian Free Schools (est. 1971) with about 35 schools and about 7500 pupils

Despite the fact that private schools have developed in many different directions according to the various standpoints taken by parents and the different motives behind their educational choices, until the 1980’s the entire private school sector grew within a more or less homogeneous cultural, ethnic and religious society. Over the past 30 years or so the process of homogenisation, which culminated with the construction of the welfare state in the first decades after World War II, has slowed down. It has been challenged by a process that has led towards greater cultural, ethnic and religious diversity.

This diversity has found expression, for example, in the founding of new free schools. Over the past 30 years immigrants and refugees from countries in the Middle East, Asia and North Africa have established a number of free schools. In the school year 2015/16 there exist 28 so-called Muslim free schools, with at least 4000 pupils. Interestingly, these schools do not have their own association, the majority having come in under the wing of the Danish Free School Association, which provides loans, consultancy services and courses for teachers and school management. If these Muslim free schools have chosen to organise themselves under the Danish Free School Association, it is likely to be because the association has a long and powerful tradition for guarding the freedoms and rights of minority groups.

This development has made considerable inroads on the political support behind the free school tradition that we have been so proud of and seen as something particularly Danish. Free school legislation has been tightened up several times over the past 20 years, and this has meant that the ministry has been given the authority to object to organisational or financial issues, to the form and content of instruction and to the values and norms that the ministry suspects to be incompatible with the traditions of Danish (free) schools.

Criticism, especially of Muslim free schools, has unquestionably contributed to free schools becoming increasingly conscious of their reputation, both as regards the public and at the ministry. By increasing their professionalism, Muslim free schools are trying to attract pupils of higher calibre capable of contributing to improving the school’s academic and measurable results with a view to reconstructing their image. An analysis made by the think-tank Kraka for 2016 shows that bilingual children with non-Western backgrounds at Muslim free schools get better grades at their final exams than children with the same backgrounds at state schools. The analysis shows that, on a scale from 0-12, pupils at Muslim free schools achieve on average almost 1.5 grades higher at their final exams – 4.6 on average at state

schools and 6.0 at Muslim free schools. This might explain why Muslim free schools are increasingly seen by Muslim parents as an alternative to state schools.

However, the question that raises its head in public debate is not about the academic skills of Muslim free schools but about their perception of community. Do these schools contribute to their pupils' integration into Danish society, or are they contributing to the formation of a parallel society? The question is, in other words, what form of *togetherness* is being promoted in the Muslim free schools? The question resounded again and with increasing force after TV2's documentary series *Moskeerne bag sløret* (*The Mosques behind the Veil*), which caused a justifiable sensation with its examples of the heavy-handed schooling of children by Muslims in values that are far removed from traditional Danish perceptions of freedom. The series has played its part in suggesting that thoughts of freedom with no *but's* seem to have acquired a whole range of *but's* after all.

Freedom with a but

Since the mid-1990s the Ministry of Education has devoted increasing attention to Muslim free schools and in broader terms to free school legislation. In 2002 and 2005 free schools were given an objects clause determining what form of social community schools were to promote.

“Schools should in their objectives and in all their activity prepare pupils to live in a society like that to be found in Denmark with freedom and democratic representation, and to develop and strengthen pupils' understanding and respect for underlying human rights and freedoms, including equality between the sexes.”

For my part, I regarded it as sensible that free schools were provided with a formulation of their aims that by and large corresponded to the one that has been applicable to state schools since 1975.

Now, however, the government wants to increase demands on free schools so that in the future they “will have to develop and strengthen the cultivation of their pupils' democratic character”. Comments on the proposed legislation tell us that, “it should be stated unequivocally in the legislation that free schools at primary and secondary levels in their objectives and in all their activity should strengthen the cultivation of their pupils' democratic character.” On the face of it, this seems to be an attractive proposition, for who would not wish that pupils' democratic character should be strengthened? I do, for one. The problem, however, is that it is not possible in principle to know whether a particular form of pedagogical approach such as the round table or Harkness method, or a particular set of social conventions, between teacher and pupils, for example, or between boys and girls will lead to strengthening of democratic character. One can only hope.

An even greater problem, however, is that the term ‘democratic character’ cannot be used as a basis for the inspection that is to ensure that schools live up to their legal obligations in this respect. This would require there to be a universally valid definition of democratic character, and this does not exist. The fact that in the comments on the proposal there is not a word about any definition of terms in itself speaks volumes. But how can anyone conduct an inspection using ‘democratic character’ as a starting point when nothing is said about what is to be understood by the term? The question is not theoretical but judicial. For

what are the criteria that could form the basis for the judgement by an inspector that a school is on shaky ground? Or for a school to ensure that it is firmly on the right side of the law?

According to the Constitution's §76, the *teaching* that takes place in free schools must "measure up to" the demands normally made of the state school. It is clear, therefore, that free schools have to teach about democracy, about human rights, about the equality of the sexes and so on. Here it is possible to test whether what pupils have learnt measures up to teaching at a state school. But this cannot be said of 'democratic character'. The proposal for legislation as it now stands requires free schools to do more than measure up to teaching at state schools. If the proposal is passed into law, legislative power is moving out into judicial waters that are, to put it mildly, muddy.

Homogeneity and diversity

The shift in the processes of social development from homogeneity to diversity raises a number of new issues that have to be taken seriously. In Denmark – as in the majority of European countries – we are living in a more multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious society than we did only a few decades ago, and this requires us at times to come up with different answers than those that are offered by tradition. There are those who think that this so-called multi-cultural society has turned the ideal of homogeneity into an anachronistic – maybe even a dangerous – form of ideal. I do not agree. A society cannot simply applaud diversity, however important it may be in a democracy. A society also has to honour homogeneity. Without some form of homogeneity, of *togetherness*, there is no society.

For my own part, I believe that it is wise in a democracy to applaud both diversity and homogeneity. The question then becomes: What form of togetherness should we strive to achieve in a society that, from a sociological point of view, has become more multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious than it was 30 years ago?

Here the old concept of citizenship acquires new currency. A number of countries have introduced teaching in citizenship as a dimension of teaching in the junior classes and as a subject in the more senior classes, for example England in 2002 and Spain in 2008. In contrast to the concept of democratic character, there are well-developed didactical methods when it comes to citizenship education, as the subject involves the teaching of knowledge, skills and attitudes. As far as I am concerned, it is perfectly appropriate to teach the values and virtues that democracy is dependent upon, such as tolerance and the ability to enter into a compromise, whereas it is inadmissible to examine whether a pupil's character has been 'democratically strengthened'.

The introduction of citizenship as a subject in state schools would mean, according to §76 of the Constitution, that free schools would also have to measure up to the same teaching content. But, whether or not we consider state schools and the Constitution, there is no doubt that free schools would benefit from promoting the idea of democratic citizenship as today's answer to togetherness, since this form of homogeneity is a crucial precondition for cultural, ethnic and religious diversity.