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THE FOLK HIGH SCHOOL: DENMARK'S CONTRIBUTION TO ADULT EDUCATION

PALLE RASMUSSEN

Introduction

The folk high school is model of adult education, developed in Denmark during the last decade of the 19th century. Folk high schools are most often boarding schools offering short or longer non-vocational courses. There is a large variety of teaching subjects, both theoretical and practical. Teaching emphasizes the development of personal, social and civic competencies, and discussion and collaboration have an important role. There are no final exams.

The folk high school model grew out of a special historical situation. In Denmark, as in many other countries, the idea of adult education was initially a by-product of the idea of basic school education for all children. Adult education was included in the plan for a general system of basic public education which was developed by the absolutist monarchy around year 1800. This work was partly inspired by the philosophy of enlightenment, and alongside public basic education for all, the plan made provision for voluntary evening classes for young people and adults. However, by the time the reform was introduced, the state did not have the resources to implement it. The Danish state was bankrupt, having chosen the wrong side in the Napoleonic wars. The basic school system was built up slowly during the first half of 19th century, and the evening classes spread even slower.

The early state initiatives in adult education were in fact overtaken by the folk high schools, which were an education initiative from below, inspired especially by ideas developed by Nikolaj Grundtvig.

The educational ideas of Nikolaj Grundtvig

Nikolaj F. S. Grundtvig (1783 - 1872) was a pastor and bishop, but also a poet, philosopher, historian and politician (Lawson 1993). In Grundtvig's early writing the dominant idea was Danish national consolidation based on Lutheran Christianity. Gradually new ideas emerged, not least in articles in the journal 'Danne-Virke' which Grundtvig himself published from 1816. He now refrained from basing the enlightenment of the people in the Christian faith and the revelations described in the Bible. Instead the emphasis was on what he later called 'Christianity as an outlook'. This entails a distinction between on one hand Christian faith and on the other Christian recognition of the human being as a creation, a recognition that, in Grundtvig's view, can be shared by all spiritual people regardless of their position towards Christianity. He further argued that the Nordic people have special resources for developing a genuine Christian outlook, because they have a tradition of natural religious feeling which manifests itself in deep deference towards what has been inherited and a stable conviction of the presence of an all-mighty god and a governing providence (Grell 1998: 15 f.) For Grundtvig this was the elementary humanity on which popular education should be based.

Grundtvig saw popular and human life in the early 19th century as being in a state of crisis. The reason for this was a false conception of humanity, the consequences of which had become evident through the French revolution. During his stay in England in 1829, Grundtvig had also seen symptoms of this crisis. In Oxford and Cambridge he had witnessed a type of scientific thought that he found completely out of touch with the reality of English society, and for that reason also unable to have an impact on social reality. The dominant form of science and its human values had led to disintegration, emptiness and powerlessness in the face of contemporary social reality.

As an alternative, Grundtvig envisaged a type of scientific knowledge that ‘not only extends to all that is knowable, but embraces it as a living idea and with a common purpose, which is the enlightenment of human life in all its directions and relationships’ (Grundtvig 2011: 62). He was well aware that scientific thought is different from popular learning and life, but he claimed that a scientific approach must connect to popular learning in order not to be derailed. The broad mass of people would not be able to unite these two types of thinking, but they should not be allowed to exist in isolation from each other, because scientific thinking would then degenerate into lack of spirituality and popular learning into superficiality. He argued that only through the native tongue can the living historical outlook and through it true humanity manifest itself as a determining element in human being’s lives. Through its history and its mother tongue any people has the mission to contribute to a growing understanding of the true relation between the creator and his work. Grundtvig also used the concept of the popular spirit, which has the power to connect a people to its history.

The reorientation of Grundtvig’s ideas also led to a clarification of his views on popular education (Grell, 1998). He now saw the school and education as an independent factor in a people’s life, alongside the church and the state.

A key text for understanding Grundtvig’s views on popular education and the folk high school is ‘The Danish Four-leaf Clover or A Partiality for Danishness’ published in 1836 (included in Grundtvig, 2011). His argument here includes a distancing from the traditional schooling based on the Latin language and heritage, which dominated Danish as well as European higher education at the time. Latin schooling is described as ‘the school of death’ in contrast to the school for life, which has its basis in the Christian outlook (rather than faith) and which aims at historically informed learning for the benefit of civic life and society. Learning must establish an educated culture, which will empower the people to manifest influence in the popular council of state.

The high school was envisaged primarily as a school for popular and civic life. However, Grundtvig also described a somewhat different type of high school, the one he proposed for establishment at the Soroe Academy. This was to educate civil servants and representatives elected to the assembly of social estates that had been established by the King.

In the folk high school the most important subjects to be taught were to be the mother tongue and national history. There was also to be teaching in the national constitutional framework and in geography, science and literature.

From around 1845 the increasing tension between Denmark and Germany influenced Grundtvig’s views on popular education and prompted him to emphasize the Danish culture as an independent one. ‘Danishness’ was now seen as true human creation in a popular form. In Denmark the ‘popular school’ had the upper hand in relation to the ‘big machinery’, and this benefitted sound thinking not

only in relation to ‘craft activity’ but also in relation to ‘life earlier and now’ with its virtues and vicissitudes.

The most important text on the high school from this period is probably “A Congratulation to Denmark on the Danish Dimwit and the Danish High School”, published in 1847 (included in Grundtvig, 2011). The background was that the King had announced his decision to establish a Danish high school in Soroe, following Grundtvig’s proposal (in the end the project was not realized). In this text Grundtvig attacks both Latin education and German culture, but he emphasized that Danishness does not exclude connections to other cultures, and that Danishness ‘is happy to welcome, appreciate, extol, and as far as possible acquire all that is so-called ‘foreign’ (...), so as not to miss out on what is universal and common to all mankind, and in which of course everything that is truly ‘of the people’ will eventually find its purpose and be illuminated’ (Grundtvig 2011: 320).

Grundtvig saw a risk that the school could make its student dabblers in scientific thinking. Because of that his preferred students were young people who had already found work in a practical occupation to which they could return after a spell at the high school. In a speech given in the newly established Parliament in 1849 he argues that not childhood but youth is the right age for education and enlightenment. In that phase of life ‘...all great questions about the calling and mission of human beings’ awaken or may be awakened’ (Grell 1998: 37).

The Danish folk high school movement

Grundtvig’s model of popular adult education contained a unique combination of elements. The high schools were to enhance young people’s commitment to and competence in developing agriculture, but teaching was to be dominated by general and cultural subjects. The schools were to be independent of the state, but a main purpose was to boost national culture and consciousness. Christianity was part of the ideological basis but Grundtvig’s kind of Christianity was more open and joyous than mainstream Protestantism. Teaching was to be based on ‘the living word’, i.e. oral narration and discussion. It was to take place in Danish and be based on Danish culture and literature. There were not to be any examinations and the students were to live-in at the schools so that they shared not only learning but also everyday life and its practical activities.

The folk high school idea achieved great impact and became a kind of social movement (Gundelach 1988: 115 f.). A main reason for this was that the idea had strong resonance among the Danish farmers, who increasingly manifested themselves as the population group ensuring the economic and social basis of society by means of their work and their ability to organise production (Korsgaard, 2000). This latter quality was demonstrated in the years after 1870, when the growth of free trade in the world market made large quantities of cheap grain from Russia and the United States available in Europe. Danish agriculture managed to survive this crisis by changing fairly quickly from grain to animal products, and it managed to introduce the new products and technologies through co-operative ventures, without giving up small and medium-size farming. This kind of experience made the farmers a self-conscious class; but for several decades, even after the formal introduction of democracy, the landowners and other conservative forces denied them access to political power and the cultural resources of established society.

Another reason for the success of the folk high schools was a widespread sense of national purpose following the war with Prussia in 1864 over the Schleswig-Holstein question. In this war Denmark lost a significant part of its territory, and while there was little prospect of regaining this there was a strong desire to strengthen Danish society in other ways. Enrico Dalgas, who worked to transform moor areas to fertile land, coined the phrase ‘what is lost externally must be won internally’, and such ideas also spurred efforts in culture and education.

The first folk high school, established in Rødding in 1844, was in fact closely linked to the Schleswig-Holstein question. It was based on funds collected to support Danish culture and language in these mixed German-Danish provinces. The school was inspired by Grundtvig’s ideas and led by people subscribing to them, although Grundtvig himself seems to have had little contact with it. The school was situated in the area ceded to Germany and had to close after the war but was re-established in Danish territory as Askov High School, one of the most famous and still existing schools.

From 1860 onwards many folk high schools were established in rural districts all over Denmark. One of the main actors was Christen Kold (Bjerg, 1994). He had grown up in the countryside, attended a teacher training school and worked as house teacher. He was strongly religious, in a more traditional protestant sense, but with his social background he was able to implement Grundtvig’s ideas successfully at Ryslinge Folk High School, which opened in 1851.

By 1880 there were 64 folk high schools which were attended by some 3.300 students. Schools were residential, and courses normally lasted between 3 and 5 months. Most schools were co-educational, but often the men went to school in the winter, when there was less work to be done in fields, while the women went in spring and summer.

The folk high schools took part in paving the way for the introduction of parliamentary democracy in Denmark around the turn of the century (Borish, 1991). The theory and practice of the folk high schools had a great impact on the Danish educational tradition, not only in the area of adult education but also, for example, in basic school education and teacher training. The high school movement created and spread an educational ideal that was anti-elitist and liberal, that emphasised oral presentation and dialogue, and that linked education to national and local rather than international culture.

The folk high school model also dominated Danish adult education in the years after the turn of the century, but in more differentiated forms. While the first wave of high schools had mainly been associated with Grundtvigian ideology, other religious and political movements now also took up the idea. One of these was the workers’ movement, which established residential schools with a view to training the movements’ representatives and activists. In the years when the farmers had been struggling to gain political power, the processes of industrialisation and urbanisation had also got under way, and the social democratic party was growing strong.

For the great majority of workers in the towns, a stay at a folk high school was not really an option. They had to find other means of developing their knowledge and improving their qualifications. The adult education that gradually was developed in the towns, for the most part, took the form of evening courses. Some of the early courses were ideologically influenced and organised by the workers’ movement and radical intellectuals. One example is the “Students’ Association’s evening

classes for workers”, which started in Copenhagen around 1880. There were also courses in general skills like writing and arithmetic, often initiated by employers or local public authorities.

Adult education in the workers’ movement was gradually strengthened, and in 1924 the “Workers Educational Association” was established. Activities such as these paved the way for the liberal evening school, which was institutionalised in a unique way in the nineteen forties. A scheme was adopted which allowed and supported teaching by voluntary associations linked to different ideologies and movements. The basic idea was that when a number of people assemble with a teacher and a programme or a subject, they are entitled to support from public funds. All the main political parties have had their own educational associations offering evening courses in both practical subjects (like housekeeping), general subjects (like languages) and ideological issues. In continuation of the folk high school these evening schools had no sharp distinction between cultural and vocational rationality. The existence of this tradition also meant that when adult education was made part of welfare and labour market policies it retained a strong humanistic dimension (Olesen & Rasmussen, 1996).

International impact

Before long the success of the folk high school movement also inspired educators outside Denmark to establish adult education institutions based on the same principles. This happened first in Norway and Sweden, two other Nordic countries with close cultural and historical ties and related languages. The first Norwegian folk high school started in 1864 and the first Swedish school in 1866. Especially in Sweden the schools played a role in developing the civic culture. At the time parts of the liberal elites were focusing on the common cultural origins of the three countries and promoting stronger collaboration among them, including political collaboration. Grundtvig, who had done much work on Nordic history, was one of the intellectuals participating in this venture, and the establishment of folk high schools in Norway and Sweden could be seen as part of a greater common Nordic project.

Another factor that contributed to spreading the folk high school idea to other countries was migration. Around 1900 many Danes migrated to North America, and some of them established adult education activities. Partly because of this, but also through international communication and cooperation among educators, the folk high school model became known in the US and in Canada (Kulich, 1964; Bugge, 1999). In these countries the model was not widely adopted, but a limited number of schools were established. Much later a leading American radical educator, Myles Horton, was to spend time in Denmark and reinvented the idea of the Folk High School in Tennessee. This took the form of an important school for social movement education, including leadership education, known as Highlander Folk High School (Horton & Freire, 1990).

In the years following the First World War the folk high school became known in many countries around the world. A feature of this period was a strong feeling that education should contribute to international and intercultural understanding, and there were many initiatives to collaborate across borders in developing progressive educational practices. The folk high school model fitted this ambition well, and school projects were started in different countries. For instance two folk high schools were established in Japan. However, the growing international tensions that in the end led to the Second World War meant that much of this work was discontinued.

Although the folk high schools established in different countries followed some of the same principles and generally acknowledged their inspiration from Grundtvig, their character and role depended on local needs and conditions. An example is the origin of folk high schools in Poland (Kulich, 2002: 50 f.). Here the existence of such schools in Denmark and Sweden had become known around 1890, and ten years later two folk high schools were established for rural youth, one for men and one for women. The schools were situated in the part of Poland controlled by Russia; to obtain permission from the Russian authorities they had to be called 'agricultural courses'. They were not to teach Polish language, literature and history, and books and notes were banned. In fact these subjects were taught anyway and books and notes were hidden when official inspection took place. By 1914 seven such schools were in operation in the Russian part of Poland. There is no doubt that these folk high schools responded not only to the need for general training of rural youth, but also to a growing sense of Polish national identity. The war ended the work of these schools but after 1920 new initiatives were taken, not least by the educator Ignacy Solarez, and more than 20 folk high schools were active in the inter-war years. These had strong links to the Polish peasant movement and some of them were closed by the conservative government.

Another example is adult education in Tanzania. Following independence (Tanganyika in 1960 and Zanzibar in 1964), Tanzania embraced the Folk High School concept. During the presidency of Julius Nyerere, the concept was reinvented with a view to developing agricultural colleges in the East African country (Dahlstedt & Nordvall, 2011). These schools, developed in collaboration with Swedish educationalists, were known as Folk Development Colleges and were residential, hosting persons who had been successful in the famed national literacy programme and who were selected by their village community (Bhola, 1984: 154; Mayo, 1997: 64).

The most important international impact of the Danish folk high school has not been the work of actual schools in different countries, but the widespread knowledge of the educational principles formulated originally by Grundtvig and Kold and developed through the intensive work of the first folk high schools in the last part of the 19th century. Together with other progressive models of adult education the folk high school has given inspiration for education and learning in many contexts (Warren, 1989).

The Danish folk high school today

Historically the tradition of the folk high school has had significant impact on educational practices both in Denmark and elsewhere. And folk high schools are still an important element in Danish education today, although the societal context is obviously very different and has changed much of the rationale for attending these schools.

Denmark is no longer a traditional society with a large rural population. Agriculture now has a subordinate role in the economy, and it is highly mechanized and run by relatively few well educated people. So there is no longer a close connection between a peasant class and the folk high schools. The level of education in the Danish population is generally high, and there is a comprehensive system of adult education including different vocational programmes as well as 'second chance' education in general school subjects. Many of the educational needs originally covered by the folk high schools are thus being filled in other ways.

But the folk high schools are still there. Today there are around 70 folk high schools in Denmark, most of them situated in rural areas or smaller towns and often named after the local district. Some of them, like the Askov, Testrup and Vallekilde schools, are from the founding period around 1860, while others are more recent. Almost all are residential schools with students and staff living, eating, and sharing the same daily routines together for the duration of a course.

The educational activity of folk high schools is regulated by legal framework, but the schools have much freedom regarding the subjects, content and methods of their teaching (Ministry of Children and Education 2012). The courses vary in length from a week to several months. The subjects must be of a broad, general nature for half of the time of a course, but the rest of the time can be spent on going into depth with special subjects and skills. Many schools have and advertise a special profile, either in activities or in ideology. The Danish association of folk high schools list the following types: Christian or spiritual schools; general and Grundtvigian schools; gymnastics and sports schools; lifestyle schools; schools for senior citizens and youth schools (for the 16 - 19 age group). The Grundtvigian schools constitute the majority; they have a general commitment to the principles originally set out by Grundtvig, but are different in other respects. Some of them may focus on music and theatre, others on politics and philosophy.

As suggested by the variety of types, modern folk high schools cater for different interests and are attended by different segments of the population. Around 50.000 persons attend a folk high school each year, most of them for short courses. Most students are young adults under the age of 25. The overall gender distribution is fairly equal, although there are some well-known differences like an over-representation of women in courses on housekeeping and needlework. The level of previous education is relatively high, in fact higher than in most other types of adult education. Many of the participants have at least an upper secondary degree. This reflects the fact that courses at these residential schools are often used as a 'waiting period' for young people before entering a career or some kind of full-time vocational education.

A special type of 'waiting period' to which folk high schools have also responded is unemployment. Although labour market authorities generally prefer to have unemployed people upskilled at vocational schools, attending folk high school courses has also been recognized as relevant, especially for developing communicative and other personal skills. Around 1980, when unemployment in Denmark was high, this led to the emergence of a new type of school, the day high schools. These schools are not residential; they try to make the objective of the folk high schools concerning life enlightenment, revival and political education available for unemployed adults, most often low-skilled women or men, who neither can nor wish to leave their normal everyday lives. The framework and function of the education is determined by the labour market and by the form of working life, but content and pedagogy find their inspiration in the tradition of popular enlightenment. There are still a considerable number of these schools, which are generally smaller and less independent than the traditional folk high schools.

The folk high schools of today are in many ways different from the ones that were established during the second half of the 19th century. But it is significant that they still refer to the educational values and principles formulated by Grundtvig and Kold, and that they generally are successful in applying these principles to educational activities for modern individuals.

Conclusion

Under the conditions of modernisation the social basis and the cultural significance of learning undergo rapid change. This represents challenges to the folk high school model, which was originally closely connected to different types of collective actors and identities, for instance in local rural communities, in social movements and in labour market organisations. Today these collective actors have a less prominent role, and new types of identity and solidarity are emerging in modern societies. A trivial but nevertheless telling example is the fact that the folk high school tradition strongly emphasised the Danish language as an expression of popular experience and national identity, while modern young Danes embrace American culture and enthusiastically speak English whenever they have the opportunity. This does not mean that the folk high school model and its cultural roots are now irrelevant and should be abandoned. The social and personal aspects of learning, the right to adult education and educational equality are still important values, but they need to be reinterpreted and reaffirmed. As argued by Habermas (for instance in Habermas 1995), open and democratic communication with inclusion of all relevant partners offers a potential way to undertake this.

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