

The Danish Free School Tradition – a lesson in democracy, by Robert Powell

Introduction

For anybody not familiar with it, the Danish education system can be something of a revelation. Though Danish schools and colleges cater very successfully to the needs of modern industry and business, they also have deep roots in a long tradition of democracy and a respect for human rights.

One of the consequences of this tradition is that there is an enormous diversity among schools and colleges, with various institutions being run and/or financed by central government, county and district councils, and - most interestingly perhaps - by a host of not-for-profit 'self-governing institutions' which in Britain would probably be called 'charitable trusts', or in the United States 'foundations'.

In Denmark there is a strong tradition of active citizenship, and things are very 'grass-roots'. Local authority schools are run by councils that really do represent local opinion, and they also have close links with the families that use them. In addition, parents and other interested parties are allowed to start their own schools – 'friskoler' – and the government actually gives them most of the money they need to do this. The result is that, alongside the local-authority schools, there is a large number of alternative 'free schools' offering a tremendous variety in educational philosophy and practice.

To make sense of the diversity that exists in Danish education, and to understand something of the way in which Danish schools operate, it is important to get some of the terminology right, especially as many of the different words used may seem rather similar:-

- A 'folkeskole' (folk/people's school) is a mixed-ability comprehensive school owned and run by the 'kommune' (district council). It caters for children from the age of six to sixteen or seventeen.
- A 'friskole' (independent school) is a school run as a 'self-governing institution', but which is largely state-funded, and which provides an alternative to the district council run 'folkeskole'.
- An 'efterskole' (continuation school) is rather like a 'friskole', in that it is also a state-funded 'self-governing institution'; however the 'efterskole' is a boarding-school that takes youngsters between the ages of fourteen and eighteen, usually for just one school year.
- A 'folkehøjskole' (folk high school) is a residential adult educational college, and like the 'friskole' and 'efterskole', it is run as a 'self-governing institution' – but one which offers no formal qualifications, but rather an 'education for life' based solely on the desire to learn. Courses may last for as little as a few days, a month or two, or for a whole school year.
- Apart from these, there is a host of different colleges that offer academic and vocational training to young adults over sixteen, and to those in later life who need further education.
- The plural of 'skole' is 'skoler', with a final 'r'. 'Skole' rhymes with hole, 'skoler' with bowler, 'folke' with pol(ka), 'høj' with boy, and 'fri' with free.