



FEATURE

The educational philosophy and pedagogical practices of a Danish children's folk high school

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The educational philosophy and pedagogical practices of a Danish children's folk high school

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Introduction

With a starting point in an ethnographic fieldwork carried out at a children's folk high school in Aarhus, Denmark during the COVID pandemic in autumn 2020, this feature article highlights how classic folk high school philosophy and pedagogy rooted within the ideas of Danish philosopher and theologian N.F.S. Grundtvig comes alive through my analyses as an underlying and somewhat subtle theme in the pedagogical practices at the children's folk high school. In other words, this article seeks to explore how folk high school pedagogy is addressed in a modern take on a folk high school and seeks to frame what seems to be the pedagogical consequence of the pedagogy being carried out by volunteers.

The analyses are presented in two parts. Part one or what I call *the educational philosophy* of the place, with its throwback to Grundtvig, is rooted within short samples of the fundamental principles behind philosophical works of Grundtvig and shows how these seemingly dated ideas are practised as the educational philosophical framework of the school. Part two frames a brief presentation of theoretical notions of *pedagogical tact* found within the works of Dutch-Canadian pedagogue and professor Max van Manen and shows how the volunteers running the school are indeed practising pedagogy, some of them without having any formal qualification to do so.

A theoretical outset

In an establishment of certain Nordic values in education, values such as *engagement* and *democracy* come up among others (Klette, 2018). In Denmark and in the Danish educational system the importance of pedagogical thinkers such as the Danish philosopher and theologian N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783-1872), who founded the folk high school movement in Denmark cannot be overstated. The philosophy of Grundtvig is rooted in the ages of Enlightenment and Romanticism, and during the mid to late 1800's Grundtvig's thoughts on schooling and education profoundly influenced and altered various parts and main philosophical foundations of the educational system in Denmark. Values such as "taking part in culture and society with an emphasis on sustaining the Danish language and Danish national history, culture and values", became key in Grundtvig's educational philosophy (Winther-Jensen, 2019; Grundtvigsk Forum, 2019). In that way Grundtvig's influence on values like *engagement* could be found here. Albeit Grundtvig was a profound sceptic towards the dawning idea of democracy as a form of state governing in Denmark in the mid 1800's, he was loyal to the Danish king and therefore saw a need to educate the Danish people about democracy as it was implemented within the Danish

constitution of 1849. Following Grundtvig's take on democracy, especially the farmers needed to be educated to secure their interests in the new democracy, as Grundtvig feared the political parties would fight for the advantage of specific groups, rather than the common good. Despite being an outright sceptic, Grundtvig played a key part in Constituent National Assembly which fostered Denmark's first constitution in 1849 and was furthermore elected for the first Danish parliament (Grundtvigsk Forum, 2019). So, without overstating his importance for Danish pedagogical traditions alone and by that the folk high school movement, Grundtvig played a key role in defining some of the key educational philosophical ideas that still today inspire what could be deemed Nordic values.

Enlightenment is a key phenomenon in Grundtvigianist philosophy. For Grundtvig, education should aim at the illumination or enlightenment of life (Winther-Jensen, 2019, p.2). Being knowledgeable alone has no actual value, if it lacks what Grundtvig calls *the higher touch*, which according to him stems from the spirit of the people, love of one's country and the mother tongue. Enlightenment or *enlightenment of life* is common life formation or informal education with its emphasis on knowledge, that forms and characterises all future actions of the practical and civil life. This kind of enlightenment of life is a key idea of the educational philosophy of Grundtvig (Winther-Jensen, 2019, p.5). But how is it achieved? For Grundtvig, people are enlightened, made aware and educated through *the living word*. The living word are those common human exchanges that flow freely and without direction. The living word is an expression of the creative power of language that shapes people in unison, and which stands in opposition to the stiff and rigid character of the written word and should remind us that everything begins with an informal conversation that absorbs us, without having a concrete purpose or a certain destination (Skovmand, 2019). In folk high school pedagogy that is: "Free to believe, to speak, to sing, I wish for all that live in the land ..." (Grundtvig, 1840). Grundtvig also uses the term living interaction about the interplay between people. In an educational setting it could be between an educator and a student, who through dialogue and discussion develop, challenge, change, create and expand the meaning of ideas, phenomena, and things (Pedersen, 2019; Rømer, 2019).

The analysis of the *pedagogical practice*, presented in part two, is rooted within the ideas of Dutch-Canadian pedagogue and professor Max van Manen. He describes tact as a phenomenon present in all people relations, and accounts for how a person is oriented towards others in a pedagogical moment. Acting tactfully revolves around being present around others in a way so that these others feel understood and cared for. Pedagogical tact has as its starting point the perspective of the child, and can appear as modesty, an openness towards the child's perception of a given situation, and a sympathetic insight into the life world of the child (Krøyer and Laursen, 2020, p.21).

The ethnographic setting

In the heart of Aarhus, Denmark's second largest city with a population over 300 000, the big white house that houses *Aarhus Børnehøjskole*, a children's folk high school, is situated. From late afternoon hours until early in the evening, the place, which is officially run and organised by Danish YMCA, frames small intimate constructed communities made up of about 6-10 children aged 6-14 and a handful of volunteering adults. The children's folk high school is, from a Danish perspective, a one-of-a-kind

institution, and acts like a leisure time pedagogy alternative to other state organised after school care institutions and out of school clubs. Formally alternative in that the place is funded by the Danish branch of YMCA and not directly by taxes as other after school activity institutions usually are. Otherwise alternative as the place officially thrive on fundamental Christian values, and offers a different curriculum to other leisure time activities; Anna, a volunteer explains in an interview: “But really it’s just like playing football. Some play football, others attend the cooking courses at the children’s folk high school”. The place offers thematised courses run by volunteers within a range of topics like guitar class, technology and crafts, and philosophy apart from a handful of different cooking and food-based courses like *The Snack Factory* and *Food from Around the World*.

The fieldwork centred primarily around the two cooking courses mentioned above. Apart from the actual course taking place from around 3:30pm – 7:00pm, the day consists of mandatory folk high school gatherings with community singing, acoustic guitar, discussions, and other exchanges, like this one:

It is a cloudy afternoon in November 2020. A community gathering has just begun as a volunteer has gathered nine children aged 8-13, and three volunteers on the stair-like multi-purpose piece of furniture built of wood and veneer, big enough to seat 10-15 children and adults. He strums a guitar, ready to play a traditional Danish folk song. “We get to practice our whistling in this one”, he says. Everybody chimes in. A line from the song says: “Domine et sanctus”. “What does that mean?”, a child asks. A girl googles it on her smartphone: “Lord and holy”, she says, shrugging her shoulders. After the song, a volunteer wants the group to discuss the following: “How can I know, that this and everything else isn’t a dream?”. “I can’t know for sure, I guess”, a girl reflects. “I can pinch myself, in order to maybe wake up!”, another girl suggests. The volunteer goes on to tell a story about a man dreaming he is a butterfly. Or is the man indeed a butterfly dreaming that it is a man? “Because, what is reality?”, the volunteer ends his story. “So are you saying that all this could be a dream?”. “Maybe. Would reality really exist, if we couldn’t sense anything? Smell and feel it...?”, the volunteer continues. “It is really confusing, this... You have given me way to much to think about now”, the girl says, laughing.

The courses are run and planned by the volunteers at the place – primarily women in their 20’s, apart from a few young men, all of them with different educational backgrounds and experiences and different reasons to be there. Some of them hold a degree in social care while others study something entirely different. My empirical jottings show that some become volunteers because it is their DNA, so to speak, as the majority of the volunteers were brought up within the YMCA, being girl scouts or doing voluntary work thus carrying a culture and a mindset with them in volunteering and being somebody for someone. Others, often social work, pedagogy or teacher students, see the volunteer work as a way of gaining experience working with children. A teacher student currently volunteering, states that she is here because she finds that the time spent doing teacher internships during her education is lacking. A few are so-called resume-volunteers doing volunteer work in order spice up their resumes.

The empirical focus of this article is the Tuesday and Thursday afternoons where the two cooking courses *Food from around the World* and *Snack Factory* take place. Both courses are populated with older girls and young females, and through the empirical excerpts, this article explores how the educational philosophy of Grundtvig, and the folk high school movement subtly frames and acts like an underlying philosophical structuring of the practices taking place there.

The educational philosophical ideas of Grundtvig through practice

“We make the world larger for the younger”, the Children’s folk high school’s tagline sounds, and draws indirectly on the foundation of Grundtvigianism and Grundtvigianist movements and their involvement in the enlightenment and education of the people (Hjordt-Vetlesen, 1980). For Grundtvig, education should aim at the illumination or enlightenment of life (Winther-Jensen, 2019, p.2), and making the world larger by adding to the students’ awareness of the world around them by talking and discussing various topics, singing, and eating together with that as both the exact practice and the sole purpose of said practice, could be seen as being heavily inspired by the educational philosophical framework of the folk high school movement and Grundtvig.

Apart from the actual course, the community gathering is the main event of the day. It is also here that the educational philosophy of the place can be noticed in the cracks of the seemingly everyday practice going about here. It is at the joint gatherings that “...some grown-ups have something on their minds, and where small acts of thought and reflection occur”, as the principal of the children’s folk high school, expresses it in a podcast (Frostholm and Bjerre, 2021). Traditionally folk high school gatherings involve community singing as a form of ritual, as community singing awakes both body and spirit, according to Grundtvig. Apart from singing together, the joint gatherings oftentimes feature poetry or music, or discussions or debate invoking elements, as seen in the “what-is-reality-session” above - all of them there to create mutual reflection within the community.

It is Tuesday and the clock is 3:23 pm, when three girls aged 11 arrive loudly, rattling, and casually through the door at the school. “Oh, look at all that stuff, you bring with you!” one of the volunteers nearest the door, says, and turns around toward the girls, who are off-loading school bags, gym bags, jackets, and a single cool box next to the multi-purpose stair-like construction. “Yes, I am bringing a cool box, because I brought meat-free lasagne for lunch today”, one of the girls proclaims. The stair-like multi-purpose piece of furniture will later act as a frame for the joint gathering – a re-occurring main event of everyday life at the site.

At the gathering ten children and five adults, some sitting, others lying on their sides, are spread among each other on the three stair-like levels. The volunteer running today’s gathering is Julia, a 23-year-old blond woman studying to become a social educator. She is sitting in a chair in front of everybody: “Well, we are at a folk high school, so let us begin with a song. “Song 453, our own song!”. No one present today is too familiar with the acoustic guitar to give it a go, so the song will be done a cappella. Everybody chimes in, some looking at text in the official songbook. Others know every word. After the singing Julia carries on: “I get to do something rather exiting, later today”, she reveals. “I am going dumpster diving!”. More than a few of the children have heard about the phenomena. Julia is going dumpster diving behind the supermarkets in the city. “Diving... in dumpsters?”, a girl lying down asks. “Yes, I am taking other people’s trash... a by that putting a stop to food waste!” the volunteer replies. “Yes, we have to stop throwing away perfectly good food”, the youngest girl of the group, aged 8, says. Today’s course The Snack Factory will therefore revolve around making snacks out of food, that would otherwise have been discarded.

15 minutes later the ten children, all of them girls, are gathered around the modern industrial kitchen of the folk high school, peeling carrots into thin peels. They will become carrot muffins. “But.. is this garbage?”, one of the girls asks. “Well the outside of the carrot would have been, had we not made it into something else”, the volunteer leading the session counters, and continues to show the

children the dirty water in which the carrots have been cleaned. "It looks like wee!", cries one of the girls. Everyone laughs. "Today's message is to stop wasting food... not to eat garbage", the volunteer says, and continues: "Did somebody think we were going to eat stuff out of a bin?". "Yeah! ... and it made me worry!", the 8-year-old girl replies.

The empirical excerpt shows how the overall theme food waste - the content of the day, originates from one of the volunteers and runs through both the joint gathering and the course to become the main philosophical focal point of the day. With a throwback to Grundtvig and the idea of how people are enlightened and made aware through the living word and living interactions, reminiscences of the educational philosophy of Grundtvig can be noticed in the cracks of the seemingly everyday practice of the children's folk high school. The volunteer's preoccupation with food waste becomes something that the children are invited to both ask and speak up about and to take a stance on through living interactive dialogues. In that way the community are informed by current culture and trends of our times, and through the cooking of carrot muffins from carrot peels, the participants get an opportunity to interact with the ideas and conceptions of wasting food in a safe and informal educational environment. For some the ideas are new and encourage a new way of thinking while for others the concept of food waste is well-known. That, indeed, diverse array of ways of relating to a given topic is given through the educational philosophy of the place. "Opinions are disrupted at a children's level... and they [the children] are sometimes met in opposition", the headmaster, Thomas Krøyer, explains in a podcast (Frostholm and Bjerre, 2021). The claim talks about a practice where being confronted with other people's sometimes different conceptions or ideas or different readings of matters, act like a welcome opportunity to reflect upon one's own pre-conceptions or understandings. In that way the children and the volunteers get an opportunity to test ideas and understandings and, in a way, to add and subtract to their formulated meanings in a safe setting.

A significant finding during the fieldwork was that I never once experienced that those responsible for the line of pedagogy - the volunteers - express what would be *the better thing* to think or mean, like when, for example, the question *what is a family?* comes up at one of the joint gatherings. On the contrary, curiosity and inquiring follow-up questions characterise the exchanges of the group. And maybe educational practices like this, conveys the very DNA of the educational philosophy behind the folk high school movement. Headmaster of Danish folk high school in Hadsten, Denmark, Jacob Mortensen claims that the pedagogical practices at his school should indeed not confirm certain political or ethical values or readings. The educative value or *enlightenment*, if you will, consists, on the other hand, of a will to develop a sense towards a variety of different readings or values and the skills needed in how to respond and relate to such a diverse picture (Mortensen, 2017). He says:

"Education has to do with opening the world and directing your attention toward different values and perspectives in life. Also, it has to do with one's world becoming big enough to include others in it" (Mortensen, 2017).

A clear nod is made to Grundtvig here, in that enlightenment is experienced through a living interaction between the learners' own perspectives, the case and others' reading of said case.

As said earlier, the educational values of the Children's folk high school seem to shine the clearest through the everyday interactions between the children and the volunteers of the place. Only once during the fieldwork did I witness the pedagogy of the place being explained verbally and made explicit for a group of volunteers. On a lazy cloudy Sunday in Aarhus, the volunteers gathered to initiate new volunteers. They are urged to "...initiate talks about anything and everything... sometimes the children might teach you something!". When they talk about the joint gatherings they are told to reflect upon "how to create some folk high school reflections here". To explain what that could mean, I again turn to Thomas Krøyer, the headmaster, who in a podcast says:

"We are standing on the shoulders of over 175 years of folk high school tradition. It can't just be "Hello, how was your day?". We encourage everyone to contribute and maybe to disagree within a safe frame" (Frostholm and Bjerre, 2021).

Besides an historical awareness the quote tells of an attention toward the educational philosophy of the folk high school movement. It is with a nod to Grundtvig, that all users of the place are urged to reflect in the meeting between diverging stances and attitudes toward different matters. That Sunday, one of the more experienced volunteers says: "We do something completely different from your traditional after school care". Maybe the practices of the Children's folk high school are just one way of practising living interaction as an educational practice. Especially the phrase "...sometimes the children might teach you something!", underlines the pedagogical value of living interaction, where the point with Danish philosopher, Thomas Rømer is that both the institution, the teachers, the students, the subject, and the case are always developing together (Rømer, 2019, p.69).

On pedagogical practices: "Has she got all the right answers?"

As stated above, the pedagogical philosophy of the Children's folk high school is seemingly only explained to the volunteers once during the field work at the introductory course for new volunteers. Nevertheless, the pedagogical acts practised on an everyday basis seem to work and flow according to the, sometimes vague, reminiscence of a distinct didactic strategy. I turn to Max van Manen's idea of *pedagogical tact* to explain how the, often non-educated, volunteers at the place still manage to practise some kind of directional pedagogy seemingly without the constant reminder of clearly articulated methods or tools. van Manen states:

"Pedagogy is not just an objective social science construct. It is a phenomenon that issues a complex imperative in the manner that we see, feel, sense, reflect, and respond to the call of the child before us" (van Manen, 2012, p.10).

Following van Manen, pedagogy and its practices cannot or should not always be narrowed down to formulated methods or strategies. As one of the experienced volunteers put it: "One cannot study the human qualities needed here". But what does that mean? To van Manen, *pedagogical tact* has been used to describe a certain ethical sense of pedagogical options or ways of taking action, not a distinct skill set which can be learned, but more like a dynamic ability or power within a human being that is developed and nurtured in a person's relation to other people and in mirroring others (Krøyer and Laursen, 2020; van Manen, 2015). Anna, a volunteer states:

"I think I draw on... Like, the idea that nobody should really be alone. Because, that is just like 'not cool'. So I try to be a kind of puppet-master, trying to engage in relations, on behalf of the children. We feel our way around it, sometimes... 'What if we created the groups of children like this' and 'how would they benefit from this approach?'... We began thinking like that, at the end of the course."

I find the ideas of van Manen useful in describing the ways in which I witness the volunteers act accordingly toward the children they work with. With little or no formal training they seem to know what to do or as van Manen puts it: "Knowing what to do when you do not know what to do" (van Manen, 2015). "I have like... no pedagogical tools" one of the more experienced volunteers tells me during an interview, and she continues:

"Some of us have no experience working with children, while others have more to give concerning education. Sometimes I stop and think, that it is more obvious for some to be here, than me, for example. But everybody has something to give."

If anything, the quote tells of the attitude of the volunteers and the approach of the place; '*everybody has something to give*' seems to be a legitimate qualifying strategy for everybody to try their way at volunteering at the school. From there on out one can be asked, with the words of van Manen, to feel and sense their way about the children there. The following excerpt shows how the pedagogical practices are often made up as they go or maybe drawing on previous experiences:

It is Thursday and the participants from Food from around the world have just put their shepherd's pies in the oven, as Sarah, a 9-year-old girl suggest a break: "Who wants to do a play for all the grownups?". Everybody agrees to do that, and the seven girls leave the kitchen, leaving the four volunteers in the kitchen. "How much should they be allowed to play by themselves, while they are here?", Ida asks, and looks at her three colleagues. "Well... If everybody is involved in their playing, I guess...", Tina, suggests. "Yeah okay... that was what I was thinking too...".

The excerpt showcases the kind of initial doubt that occurs after one of the children at the course suggests doing something without the supervision of adults. *Where do we stand on this matter?*, seems to be the crux of Ida's question. The action taken, seems to be based on ethical judgement based on the concrete context of the situation – pedagogical tact, maybe. When faced with the episode from before, Tina, who is an educated social educator, later says to me:

"...And there are quite a few pedagogy students or educated pedagogues here, and I think a lot about what I do and what I say. Do the others sometimes think: "Is she really a pedagogue? Have she got all the right answers?"

This statement talks of an awareness towards the initial doubt involved where any pedagogue, teacher or volunteer is asked to act accordingly right here, right now. *Am I obliged to have all the right answers given my educational background?*, she seems to reflect, as she is very aware of what she says and does. And is she allowed to doubt her own pedagogical judgement? "I think of it as a kind of balancing act, with all the theories and whatnot.", Tina later says, as she implicitly answers her own question about which skillset to draw on in different situations. Again, the idea of pedagogical tact, as it is a non-reflective and practical knowhow, can be used to explain the underlying motives behind the pedagogical

practices where the volunteers have to just act in the moment. Pedagogical tact is to act according to a certain situation, where no general principles for the right way to act are to be found (Krøyer and Laursen, 2020), and that is exactly what is being practised on an everyday basis at the school, I found.

Closing remarks

Among other things, this feature article shows how traditional pedagogical ideas rooted within thinkers like Grundtvig, thrive and come alive through everyday conversations, community gatherings, poetry-sessions, singing and the cooking and eating sessions at a Danish Children's folk high school. It also explores how mostly non-educated volunteers at the children's folk high school manage to practise engaging, democratic, and educating pedagogical activities like community gatherings as the one with the butterfly/man paradox from earlier. Throughout the analyses of empirical excerpts featured in this article, I claim that the ability to perform pedagogy, as it is explained by van Manen, is not necessarily developed through formal education, but can be practised by people who simply has the right mindset for the practice, or what van Manen would deem *pedagogical tact* (van Manen, 1991), whilst the educational philosophy of Grundtvig subtly frames and acts as an underlying philosophical structuring of the practices taking place there. I would like to end on an open question put forth by one of the volunteers at the school. She asks: "Have we succeeded, when pedagogues prove themselves unnecessary?". Whether she is right, I do not know, but what my analyses show is that the practising of a pedagogy that works is not only restricted to those formally educated to do so but is able to simply exist and thrive at a place built on a foundation of Nordic educational philosophy characterised by values such as engagement and enlightenment.

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