Looking Back at Friskolen 70

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IT HAS BEEN SEVEN YEARS since my main visit to Friskolen 70 in Copenhagen, Denmark, and five years since I wrote about it in *Friskolen 70: An Ethnographically Informed Inquiry Into the Social Context of Learning* I still have many fond memories of the place, and I still agree with much of what I wrote. But there are some points I would like to make now in way of criticism of Friskolen 70. Some of these criticisms appear in sketchy form in the concluding chapter of my study. Others only became clear to me during the intervening years (post-1988).

For all its positive aspects, it still must be said that Friskolen 70 is a rather artificial place. It is a place designed for (and with) children. It is not a true community space, like a library, to be used as much or as little as one pleases. True, attendance at Friskolen 70 is not strictly enforced (the kids are, in theory, free to come when and if they want), but it is also true that the students enrolled at the school are *expected* to come. Minimally, they are expected to come because their parents pay a nominal tuition for them to go there. More to the point, they are expected to come because there is nowhere else for them to go, and the school seems like a reasonably nice place for them to be.

Friskolen 70 *is* a school, and like any school, one of its main functions is babysitting—or daycare, to be more polite. The adults at Friskolen 70 are paid to look after the kids, to think up at least some interesting things for them to do, and in general to make themselves and their many skills and talents available to the kids. Thankfully, little or no "education" takes place: the teachers are not there to teach the children what they think the children ought to know. As I have written, this makes Friskolen 70 feel more like a clubhouse than a school, and the children by and large seem to enjoy being in this active, lively environment. But it is a strange sort of club, indeed, that expects you to be there 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., Monday through Friday. I can see why many kids would want to spend some of their time in special "kid places" like Friskolen 70. But I don't think it is good for them to be compelled or "expected" to spend most of their time in such places, no matter how nice those places may be.

The folks at Friskolen 70 take a tremendous number of trips. In fact they spend half of their budget on trips of various sorts, making the school a base from which to explore the world around them. This is to their credit. Still, when the children go on these trips, it is clear that they are only *visitors*. The world must seem like a giant museum, with

everything behind glass walls. They may have access to the world around them, but they are held back from participating and playing a meaningful part in it. They can visit, but they can't stay. Kids in school, even Friskolen 70, are treated like second-class citizens, perhaps illegal aliens. Only after ten or twelve years of "naturalization" will they be released to play some part in the world. I don't think this is a healthy state of affairs. I feel that children both want and need to play a meaningful part in the world from the very beginning, not just when *praktik* time comes around.

I have often asked myself whether Friskolen 70 has its own type of hidden curriculum. I think the answer has to be: yes, it does. The teachers (and parents) at Friskolen 70 are believers in something called "child development." And they are especially concerned with the child's social development. They believe that children are born asocial and self-centered, and if they are to "become social," then they (the children) must be weaned out of their egoistic behavior. The teachers are there in part to "help this development along"— whatever that means. Though they have no specific curriculum or objectives in this regard, their intentions are nonetheless revealed at the weekly teachers' meetings when they speculate why, say, Jonas is so rowdy, or why Katrine seems somewhat sad and withdrawn. Moreover, they wonder what they can *do* about such situations, what they can do to get Jonas to calm down or Katrine to be more happy or social.

For me, asking the question "How can I get so-and-so to ... ?" and then making some sort of intervention, places one in a certain camp: the camp of the people-shapers. Indeed, the teachers' meetings usually made my stomach feel quite knotted. What right, I asked myself, did these people have to intervene in this way? Why was all of this development talk necessary? It slowly dawned on me that the hidden curriculum of the place was that you had to conform to certain norms of "happiness," "sociability," and "collective responsibility." The great unwritten rule was that you could not be anti-social or unhappy for very long—or else some teacher would try to intervene.

Now, wanting children to be happy or social or caring is no crime, and it certainly seems a far cry from demanding that a child knows her times tables. However, it is one thing to respond to a Jonas or a Katrine directly, perhaps as a friend; it is quite another thing for a group of people who feel it is part of their mission or job to intervene in children's lives in this way. The teachers at Friskolen 70 may have refrained from unasked-for teaching, but I sometimes worried that they were administering unasked-for therapy, which just might be even worse. (Worse, because such people-shaping is done much more subtly, thus making it harder to detect and resist.)

In a short piece John Holt wrote on alternative schools, he made a distinction between working *with* children and working *on* children. At Friskolen 70, most of the time, the

teachers worked with the children. But, to the extent that they embraced these ideas of child development and socio-behavioral norms, they also worked on children. Even though such rituals as the food and cleanup teams evolved out of need, they did eventually come to have a small element of "this will teach you how to cooperate, to work as a team, to be more social and responsible." When the teachers discuss among themselves how these groups are functioning, they do not talk about whether the school is clean or the food good. They are mostly concerned with the level of cooperation exhibited and degree of growth in collective responsibility. Although I did not realize it at first, I now have to admit that there is a pedagogical element to many of these rituals, even though they are by no means only pedagogical.

In the above-mentioned piece on alternative schools, Holt wrote:

> There seems to me something deeply and even dangerously ambiguous about the relation between adults ("teachers" or whatever) and children in an alternative school. In most schools the relation is stark and clear. School is the Army for kids. Adults make them go there, and when they get there adults tell them what to do, bribe and threaten them into doing it, and punish them if they don't. When the teachers in an alternative school try (as they should) to give up this bad relationship, it is very unclear what they put in its place. If they are not there to tell the children what to do, what are they there for? To "help" the children? Did the children ask for this help? Can they get away from it? Sometimes alternative schools talk about teachers and students being equal. If so, why are the adults paid? And to do what? [1]

It seemed that the adults at Friskolen 70 felt they were paid to look after the social, intellectual, and physical development of the children. If someone seemed to be floundering, they would try, carefully, subtly, to intervene. I found myself feeling that the children's development should be none of their business. The teachers, on the other hand, felt *responsible* for each child's development—that it *was* their "business" (in both senses of the word).

The seamy aspects of "being responsible for another person's development" only became clear to me after a few discussions I had with Ivan Illich. If you really believe, as I do, that learning is not the result of teaching, then you must also agree that one person cannot be *responsible* for another's learning, growth, or development. Teachers can surely have an influence, but the learner alone is responsible. Illich said to me, "To act as responsible teachers only deepens their sense that they can *do* it, that they can provide something that they will eventually call 'education,' that they know what the child needs,

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[1]John Holt, "On Alternative Schools," *Growing Without Schooling* #17, p. 6.

what he or she lacks, and how it can be furnished. And the more deeply they feel responsible, the more they will be obsessed with a search for a *method* — a method that allows them to do their job properly." The question I had to grapple with was, Is this "job" a legitimate one? I had to admit that, no, it was not. I came to believe that teaching should be a privilege, not a profession. It is indeed a privilege and a joy to help someone do something, when we are asked to do so. I am not saying we should never try to influence what other people think, do, or feel. But people-shaping is a dangerous business. If we interevene in other people's lives, we should do so out of our own personal, subjective feelings (out of care, concern, friendship, or perhaps anger, horror, or fear), not because it is our job, role, or professional obligation. And we should be aware that no intervention is without its risks.

So for these and other reasons, I am not trying to convince people to create schools like Friskolen 70. I learned a lot from visiting that unique place, and it will always occupy a special place in my heart. Indeed, Friskolen 70 is probably about as good as a school can get. (John Holt himself termed it "one of the best schools.") *But the idea of school itself is not good.* Friskolen 70, like any school, is an adjustment to the sad fact that children are not wanted in modern society; there is nowhere for them to go, nothing for them to do. It seems to me that the real work we need to do is not to create nice little havens in which to keep children while their parents are off at work, but to break down the barriers that separate children from adults and their work and concerns. I want to find ways to re-integrate children into society, not as visitors or observers, but as real participants. We would not have to worry about "learning" or "development" in such a society. These things would look after themselves.