Lessons from the Norwegian Folk High School Tradition

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Founded in the mid-1800s, as, in part, a critique of classical education, the Scandinavian folk high school movement has struggled throughout its existence to offer an alternative to traditional education. However, while the philosophical principles of the folk high school system are a necessary departure from broader educational directives, they are not sufficient in ensuring its survival. Drawing on original interview data collected during a research trip to Norway, we explore the philosophy, structure and meaning of the folkehogskole tradition. We suggest that one of the unintended consequences of the connection between the structure and tensions of contemporary folk high schools, and the meanings that are created by students’ experiences within it, is that folk high schools tend to facilitate the same socialization processes they reject in principle. We situate this discussion in the scholarly literature related to the transitioning-to-adulthood experience.

Norway, folkehogskole, adolescents, socialization, work-to-school transition

INTRODUCTION

“Knowledge forced on one will never remain in the soul for eternity” (Plato).

Plato’s words shape the motto of the Ringerike Folk High School in Hønefoss, Norway, one of approximately 80 such schools in the country. As is traditionally the case in Norwegian folk high schools (folkehogskole), Ringerike operates without tests, grading, diplomas or transcripts and features a curriculum comprised of the arts, cultural awareness and outdoor pursuits. Enrolment is voluntary and tuition free of charge. The instructional format is simple and consistent: learning activities are both physically engaging and intellectually challenging; students are given ample opportunity to explore their identities as independent, individual learners and as members of learning communities; and instruction emphasizes direct, purposeful interaction with the human and natural environments being studied (Mortensen, 1976).

In Norway, as well as the three other Nordic countries, the words of Nikolai Grundtvig, the Danish priest, poet, philosopher and educational reformer, stand today as they did in 1844, “that a proper education should awaken the individual’s aspirations to live a meaningful and fruitful life…by cultivating a spiritual commitment through the study of man [sic] and his achievements both past and present” (quoted in Allchin, 1997). The folk high school movement founded by...
Grundtvig in Denmark, and now over 150 years old, was created to complement the restrictive structure of compulsory education by adding an element of spiritual awakening, and by doing so, help young adults internalise lifelong learning, personal growth and a sense of cultural identity.

Drawing on original interview data collected during a research trip to Norway, we explore the structure and meaning of the *folkehogskole* tradition. This is an important area of inquiry, in part, because little current information on the folk high school concept is available to English-speaking educators (see Davis, 1971; Manniche, 1969; Mortensen, 1976). More importantly, we believe folk high schools in Norway provide a uniquely interesting comparative case study of influences on adolescent education. Folk high schools are designed to facilitate students’ transition from compulsory high school – and explicitly not designed as preparatory schools for higher education or paid labor. Rather, they are conceptualized as “schools for life,” helping adolescent men and women become responsible adults, whatever their futures may hold. However, folk high schools seem to emphasize (and indeed cultivate) the very qualities and skills discussed in the scholarly literature on the high-school-to-college transition (see Ezezek, 1994; Feenstra, et. al., 2001; Holmbek & Wandrei, 1993; Kegan, 1994), the high-school-to-work transition (see Arum & Sharit, 1995; Ray & Mickelson, 1993; Rosenbaum, 1996), and the adolescent-to-adult transition (see Baxter-Magolda, 1998, 1999, 2000; Hall, Williamson & Coffey, 1998). In short, Norway’s folk high schools seem to successfully facilitate the very process they reject as an overt goal.

In the next section we describe the mission of the mid-1800s folk high school movement, followed by a brief description of Norway’s current educational system and the location of folk high schools within that system. After discussing our data and methodology, we explore the contemporary *folkehogskole* including the tensions, challenges, and opportunities contained in its base philosophical principles and its dynamic operating structure. We then explore the meanings that are created around the experience of folk high schools. We suggest that one of the unintended consequences of the contemporary folk high school experience is that students are better prepared to meet the rigours associated with further educational advancement and the demands imposed by the labour market. We situate this discussion in the scholarly literature related to the transitioning-to-adulthood experience.

**THE FOLK HIGH SCHOOL TRADITION**

As noted above, the folk high school movement began in Denmark in the mid-1800s under the leadership of Nikolai Grundtvig. Reacting against the elitism, authoritarian teaching and rote learning symptomatic of classical education during his time, Grundtvig believed “he could not find the truth in the learned study of a book, but rather in the living community of men and women who are united by faith” (Manniche, 1969 p.89). Grundtvig first called for “schools without books” in 1837 and the first folk high school opened its doors in Denmark in 1844. Grundtvig advocated schools for the “common people,” free and open to all, that emphasized spiritual enlightenment, free-flowing oral dialogue between students and teachers (the “Living Word”), self-fulfilment, fellowship with others, practical knowledge, active democratic participation or citizenship, singing as a mechanism to establish group solidarity, and the native language (“mother tongue”) as the means of enlightenment (Davis, 1971; Manniche, 1969; Mortensen, 1989; Opstein, 1983; Rust, 1989). As Davis explains, the concern of folk high schools “is not so much with the intellectual growth of the student as with his [sic] growth in a wider sphere, one which

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1 Grundtvig and American educator John Dewey, though not historical contemporaries, shared many of the same visions for a more enlightened and productive education. Both Grundtvig and Dewey believed strongly in the idea of experience in education, that education must be applicable to everyday life, and that education could be a vehicle for social change through its cultivation of an active, informed citizenship (Allchin, 1997; Dewey, 1916; Opstein, 1983).
contains the intellectual but is not defined by it” (1971 p.4). Significantly, Grundtvig believed that such an education was most appropriate for people on the threshold of adulthood:

[He] was convinced that until the body and brain have fully developed and until life has revealed itself so completely to the individual that he [sic] can recognize it when it is described and feel a natural desire to be enlightened, the kind of enlightenment he had in mind would fall on barren ground and be largely wasted effort. (Davis, 1971 p.29; see also Manniche, 1969)

Gradually spreading to other Nordic countries, the first folk high school opened in Norway in 1864.2 Resonating with core Norwegian values – personal independence, respect for the law, respect for education, egalitarianism, a strong work ethic, support for local communities, and a deep belief in the democratic process – folk high schools were part of an explicit nation-building enterprise in the mid to late 1800s and the most visible type of non-formal education in Norway (OECD, 1990 p. 60; Rust, 1989 p.107, 120). The folk high school movement was not without competition, however. In 1877, a series of county youth schools began to open, similar to folk high schools in format but oriented toward the teaching of basic skills with an orthodox Christian perspective. In the late 1940s, Christian youth schools were forced to transform into folk high schools to secure funding support from the government. This history generated a secular vs. religious divide that continues to exist in the folk high school system (see discussion below).

CONTEMPORARY SCHOOLING IN NORWAY

The current public education system in Norway is comprised of three tiers. The first tier of basic schooling includes primary school (Grades 1 through 6) and lower secondary school (Grades 7 through 9). Basic school has been mandatory in Norway since 1920 with the vast majority of students attending public rather than private schools (Hagen & Tibbitts, 1993 p.21). The second tier, upper secondary education, includes Grades 10 through 12. Attracting approximately 90 per cent of those who have completed basic schooling, upper secondary school is comprised of a variety of programs from one to three years in length and provides general education, vocational training and preparation for higher education. Upper secondary education explicitly aims to ensure equal status to both practical and theoretical studies (Rust, 1989 p.256),3 with general courses existing side-by-side with practical and vocational courses (approximately 60% of students are located in vocational programs). Vocationally oriented students can elect to remain in the school, continue their education in an employment setting, or some combination of both (OECD, 1990; Rust, 1989).

The third tier consists of higher education institutions. While there are only four universities in Norway, there are more than 200 regional colleges where students can complete a range of two and three year programs. Since many Norwegians choose to gain work experience before entering university, and since males typically complete 12-15 months of military service immediately following upper secondary school, most university students are 25 years or older at

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2 The late 1800s and early 1900s also witnessed an attempt to create Danish-American folk high schools in the U.S. While initially generating considerable excitement among American educators the concept quickly fell out of favor, though several U.S. schools loosely modeled on the folk high school model have managed to survive (such as the Highlander Center in Tennesee; Davis, 1971). Perhaps the most well-known U.S.-based organization with ties to folk high schools is the Scandinavian Seminar, a non-profit organization founded in 1949 that provides study abroad programs in Scandinavia for American students and short-course programs in over 22 European countries for people of all ages.

3 This is in marked contrast to high school vocational education in the U. S., which has long been seen as a mechanism for social exclusion and personally stigmatizing for students (see Arum & Sharit, 1995; Krei & Rosenbaum, 2001).
commencement (OECD, 1990 p.88). Unlike in the United States, colleges and universities in Norway are typically non-residential.

The Norwegian government, through the Ministry of Education, funds public schools (ensuring general equality across the school system), sets the national educational agenda, and administers national curricular guidelines. The process of national educational reform, which Norway is currently undergoing, is a lengthy, open and democratic process (Hagen & Tibbitts, 1993; OECD, 1990; Rust, 1990). School reforms in Norway almost always derive from educators themselves (rather than being political initiatives) and are a response to changing social conditions, not an attempt to generate those conditions (see Rust, 1990).

Situating folk high schools

Folk high schools exist outside this broad educational structure by deliberate design. The first Folk High School Act was passed in 1892, and legislated (among other things) the amount of government funding support for each school and student in the folk high school system. Today, each school receives funding to pay teacher salaries and other financial costs. However, folk high schools are not operated by the government but by the ‘folk’, an amalgam of organizations as diverse as trade unions, Christian organizations, private foundations and consumer cooperatives, but with nearly complete autonomy and at taxpayer expense. Folk high schools are under no governmental mandate with regards to ideology, goals, curriculum or pedagogy.

There are (as of this writing) 82 folk high schools operating in Norway. Enrolment is entirely voluntary and tuition is free, though students must pay for room and board (government grants and loans are available) and the cost of study tours. Each year approximately ten per cent of upper secondary school graduates enrol in folk high schools, spending 33 weeks (August-May) in residence at the school. This is most students’ first time living away from home. Approximately 5,800 young men and women were enrolled in folk high schools as of October 2001 (Statistics Norway). A small number of students at each school (i.e. ten or fewer) are international students studying abroad in Norway. The schools are fairly small (averaging 75 students), are predominantly female (due mainly to military service requirements for men), and provide one of the few structured, residential learning experiences – where students and teachers work, live and learn together – available in Norway. Classes are held Mondays through Saturdays, with Saturday evenings reserved for student-initiated social activities.

In keeping with tradition and as mandated by the Folk High School Act of 1984, contemporary folk high schools are prohibited from having entrance requirements, tests, grades or diplomas. This experience does not constitute a so-called ‘year off’ from structured learning, however; as one teacher put it, a year spent at folk high school is “full time, not free time”. The pedagogical emphasis is on self-development through peer interaction, open discussion and dialogue, and hands-on experience. Each school prides itself on its own distinctive personality and featured

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Prior to the current efforts, Norway has experienced four major educational reform cycles in modern history: late 1830s, early 1870s, 1950s and mid-1970s. Norway has consistently relied on the model of social corporatism to guide the policy-making process. In terms of education, “this means that monopolization of tight networks of educational interest groups is an accepted practice. It is taken for granted among political factions and the general public that special councils and professional bodies ought to determine the direction of educational reform” (Rust, 1990:14).

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In addition to the annual residential course, folk high schools offer a second strand of learning. Short courses for adults, lasting from three days to sixteen weeks, are offered on weekends, school holidays and/or summer holidays. While the subject matter might differ from that covered in the annual course, the adult strand shares the folk high school emphasis on intra- and inter-personal growth (Baxter-Magolda, 1998). In 2001, approximately 19,000 adults from 50 different nations completed short courses (Statistics Norway).
selection of specialty courses. For example, Hedmarkstøppen Folk High School offers drama and dance, sports and outdoor life, music, art and design, Bible and mission, and team action on the road; Varna Folk High School specializes in health and social studies, nutrition and organic agriculture, music, social work, radio journalism, and mission work; and Nordhordland Folk High School offers introduction to child care, introduction to physical therapy, travel and tourism, introduction to computers, motor mechanics, physical education, music and drama, and form, colour and design. Folk high school teachers are selected not only for their competence in specific subject areas but their ability to instil, through example, the love for learning, community responsibility and individual growth at the heart of Grundtvig’s vision (Davis, 1971 p.13).\footnote{While a full discussion of the roles and experiences of teachers is beyond the scope of this article, we were told repeatedly that teaching in folk high school is much more than a job. The close living and learning relationships with students, non-hierarchical exchange of ideas, and the enthusiasm and dedication necessary for successfully teaching in a school without grades, contributed to teaching being understood as a lifestyle or a calling rather than a job. For those teachers who thrive, the folk school experience is immensely rewarding – as one exclaimed, “It’s easy to be happy teaching here!” Teachers report that the biggest challenges of the folk high school context are cultivating and maintaining motivation and enthusiasm (both their own and the students’), reconciling one’s personal life with the extraordinary demands of the job, and maintaining awareness of the unique mission of the school system to prevent the educational experience from mimicking regular schools. Folk high school teachers practise a form of holistic teaching, a pedagogical approach “that consciously attempts to (1) promote student learning and growth on levels beyond the cognitive, (b) incorporate diverse methods that engage students in personal exploration and help them connect course material to their own lives, and (c) help students clarify their own values and their sense of responsibility to others and to society” (Grauerholz, 2001 p.44).}

Despite sharing the values espoused by Grundtvig, however, the schools are very different from one another and it can be difficult to define a common meaning and purpose to this type of education. Davis’ 30-year old articulation remains apt:

> A folk high school is not only the school itself and its curriculum but also the students and why they come and what they do when they leave…it not only concerns itself with the “whole” person, but with the “whole” society. One of the aims of the schools is to confirm the students’ solidarity with the milieu from which they came, and to enable them when they return to make this same milieu richer and more meaningful. (Davis, 1971 p.8)

After a brief discussion of the goals and methodology of the current project, we turn to an exploration of the opportunities and challenges currently faced by the folk high school system in Norway.

**PROJECT GOALS**

Our research is contextualized by the fact that, as noted above, little information on the folk high school concept is available to American educators. As such, one of the primary goals of our exploratory research trip was to obtain a view of the Norwegian folk high school system at the turn of the new century. How is a 150-year old educational tradition faring under recent demands for increased assessment and accountability (Hagen & Tibbitts, 1993)? Is Grundtvig’s vision useful in an increasingly complex world? Our primary research goal was to clarify folk high schools’ position in the high school-to-college and high school-to-work transitions. In many ways, the boom in student services in American institutions of higher education seems to represent a reactive response to adolescent students’ general lack of preparedness for the challenges presented to them in the collegiate environment (e.g., Baxter-Magolda, 2000; Kegan, 1994). In contrast, the educational mission of folk high schools offers a more proactive approach to this transition, preparing students intellectually, emotionally and physically for living and learning in an adult world. In addition, the academic literature on the high-school-to-work transition suggests a growing disjuncture between what United States high schools are designed to prepare students for,
and what the employment sector expects from high school graduates.\textsuperscript{7} We believe the so-called ‘schools for life’ mandate of the folk high school tradition offers interesting insights into how young adults might experience the high school-to-college, work and life transitions.

**Data and methods**

During a three-week period in Spring 2001, we conducted site visits (2-3 days each) at six folk high schools in the Southern coastal region of Norway, including three schools affiliated with the Information Office for Folk High Schools (IF) and three affiliated with the Information Office for Christian Folk High Schools (IKF). The schools varied in setting (urban to rural), local ownership patterns (county to private foundation), size (50 students to 90), tenure (the oldest school was founded in 1876, the newest in 1983), popularity (determined by number of applicants), target student body, and financial stability. At each school we attended classes, ate meals, participated in school assemblies and social events, explored school grounds and the local communities, and collected the images and sounds of school life. We conducted formal (tape-recorded) interviews with school teacher-administrators (virtually all school administrators are current or former teachers), full-time teachers and students. In total, we interviewed ten teacher-administrators, nine full-time faculty members and 18 students. We also had numerous informal (non-recorded) interactions with students, staff workers, teachers, administrators and members of the local communities. Finally, we conducted lengthy (recorded) interviews in Oslo with four national folk high school administrators associated with IF and IKF. All interviews were conducted in English.

This manuscript reports primarily on the formal interview data. The open-ended loosely structured interviews lasted from approximately 15 to 180 minutes in length. Interview transcripts were analyzed using a line-by-line content analysis to uncover key issues, themes and patterns across participants’ experiences. Similar to grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), our approach was directed toward developing an in-depth understanding of the folk high school settings and its participants’ histories of, experiences with, and perspectives on the future of the schools. Due to human subjects agreements with our universities, neither the schools nor the interview participants are mentioned by name in this manuscript. All quotes included are verbatim, though they have been edited for clarity and minor grammatical errors.

**DISCUSSION**

**Current challenges and opportunities**

In the past 20 years there have been a number of changes in the folk high school experience: fewer teachers live on campus full-time, instead rotating shift duties to cover evening and weekend hours; school policies have necessarily evolved to address changing norms in drug and alcohol use, sexual activities and exposure to new technologies (email, cell phones, etc.); much of the school year is now geared toward preparing for international study trips to places such as Zimbabwe, China, Guatemala, Russia, Spain and the United States; some schools now give examinations and grades (though this violates the 1984 government mandate); and some are more clearly oriented toward academic and occupational success (violating the ‘schools for life’ mission).\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{7}This invokes, obviously, the familiar debate about whether public schools should educate for a democratic citizenship or train future workers; see Giroux (1984), Giroux and McLaren (1986), Hadden (2000), Hall, Williamson and Coffey (1998), Mitchell (2001), and Parker (1996).

\textsuperscript{8}Nearly thirty years ago, Mortensen (1976) observed an increased emphasis on academics in some schools and a reliance on grading systems in others. Indeed, one of the more vocationally oriented schools we visited offered students the option of both examinations and grades, believing it in their best interests to have tangible documentation of their experience to offer prospective employers.
visits revealed at least four distinct tensions or challenges currently faced by the folk high school system in Norway: (a) the economic viability of individual schools; (b) their relative isolation from one another and from the administrative offices in Oslo; (c) the tension between “Christian” and “non-Christian” (i.e. IKF- and IF-affiliated) schools; and (d) new accountability to the Ministry of Education. Each of these issues is discussed briefly below.

The economic viability of individual folk high schools is challenged by a number of intersecting factors. While all folk high schools receive funding support from the government to cover teacher salaries and additional expenses, as noted earlier, demographic patterns indicate a sharp birth decline in Norway (and throughout Europe), resulting in too few students for too many schools (OECD, 1990 p.15). While the school system as a whole does not appear jeopardized, individual schools are struggling to stay afloat. Competition between schools to attract students is fierce, with more and more resources allocated to marketing and recruitment. Local ownership and sponsorship patterns are perhaps most crucial for how schools fare economically, creating considerable disparity in an otherwise egalitarian-oriented national culture. One of the schools we visited was forced to take a year off in the late 1990s because it was essentially abandoned by its original owner (a labour union who has never come through with funding support) and was unable to attract enough students to justify economically its annual course. At the time of our visit the school was operating with 50 students (and room for at least 20 more) but struggling to pay salaries to its small staff. A teacher-administrator explained:

We have not done so well in '97, '98, '99 and 2000, so [the school] is not something we make money on. My work here is much more than other principals from folk high schools in [this] area. I work with economics and try to get money to pay wages and so on. So I have a very good relationship to the local bank!

Another site school, owned by the local county, received more applications than any other folk high school for 2000-2001 (close to 600) and reported no funding concerns at the time of our visit. To offset the demographic patterns and economic uncertainty, virtually every folk high school engages in external money-making enterprises, such as renting dorm rooms to overnight guests, hosting parties and receptions, running summer camps for mentally and physically challenged children and adults, and offering for-profit short-term education courses during the summer holiday.

A second challenge to the folk high school system continues to be the relative isolation of individual schools, not only from each other but from the administrative offices in Oslo (Mortensen, 1976 p.498). The independence of the schools is in some ways inevitable (due to geographic barriers, especially in the North), is mostly intentional (reflecting the deep respect for local traditions and communities throughout Norway), but seems detrimental to the overall flourishing of the school system. Both teachers and administrators report feeling isolated, with little presence in their local village or town, little interaction with nearby primary and secondary schools, little opportunity to engage in shared activities with other folk high schools, little contact with colleges and universities, and little interaction with the home administrative offices except around issues of marketing and recruitment. Principals hold annual or semi-annual meetings but most staff members have few networking opportunities with colleagues. While faculty and staff were convinced of the soundness of their own school’s purpose and goals, the sense of being participants in a larger educational movement seemed generally lacking:

Every citizen in Norway knows of the folk high schools…but they don’t know what it is. They know that there are folk high schools but what are they doing? So we have a communication problem. We have to communicate to the public what folk high schools do…We are in this public relations strategy now trying to get the schools to have a common goal (Administrator, NF).
One teacher-administrator reports that most people in the town near her school do not seem to realize the school exists, even though the folk high school is 140 years old and right next door to an upper secondary school. In her words, “The folk high school is like an island.”

A third challenge is the increased emphasis on accountability and assessment throughout the Norwegian educational system since the late 1980s (Hagen & Tibbitts, 1993 p.27). In the past decade this has impacted folk high schools in several ways. Most importantly, the folk high school system cooperated with the Ministry of Education on a late 1990s project to document or assess experiential learning and validate it against formal criteria. Each school was required to compile an extensive descriptive document detailing its basic values, teaching methods, course descriptions, overall philosophy, dormitory life and so on, a process to be repeated every five years. As an administrator at IF explained, “We are using a lot of nice words but the government wants to know what we are actually doing, what [students are] gaining from the experience.” While there was widespread resistance to such documentation, the teachers and administrators we spoke with felt that it was ultimately in the folk high school system’s best interests:

We have been rather reluctant to document ourselves at our type of school...because once you document you put things on a piece of paper and how can you really do that when you talk about people?...Every student is a universe in itself and we approach it with respect...As Grundtvig said, it’s that person that is the goal and aim for everything we do. And it’s not like [students are] an empty barrel that we’re supposed to fill...We tend to ask more about what they come with...than how we can fill [them] up...But we documented it...And that helped us...become aware of certain routines, so I think the schools ultimately benefited...There was a reluctance all over the folk high school[s] to go into it, but money talks! (Teacher-administrator)

One of the outcomes of documentation is that folk high schools are now more formally situated in the national education system than ever before. As of 1997, students receive three academic credits toward higher education through successful completion of a folk high school program.9 We emphasize that the documentation is not an outcome-based assessment. Explains an administrator with IF:

GrunDTVig said that we can say nothing about outcomes. The outcome is growing after the year...GrunDTVig pointed out that you are not doing this for an exam or degree but for life...So, how do you measure that?...On the individual scale you cannot do it. And, we don’t want it. But, you can describe it. And those three points are given to you because you have attended an environment for some time. (Administrator, IF)

In many ways gaining the three credits was an important institutional victory for folk high schools in that it formally symbolized their value and legitimacy within the Norwegian education system. However, there are several potentially negative implications of this change. First, there is now an objective criterion for successful completion: attendance. After documentation, students not appearing in class at least 90 per cent of the time over the course of the school year (counted in hours and days) do not receive a certificate of completion and are thus ineligible for the three credits (lack of attendance or a serious infraction of school rules are virtually the only way students can fail folk high school).10 Second, there is now an extrinsic reward attached to a school

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9 Young men can receive three credits for folk high school completion or for military service but not both. Completion of folk high school or military duty is considered by the Ministry of Education to certify “realkompetanse” or “life competence” (as opposed to formal competence), and is thus deemed worthy of credit toward further schooling. Real competence is currently being conceptualized by the folk high school administration as including “learning in the social arena,” “learning in the personal arena,” and “learning in the subject-matter arena” (personal communication with IKF administrator, May 30, 2002).

10 Faculty are under new accountability expectations as well. Folk high school teachers are required by contract to work 1,712 hours and 30 minutes per academic year, including time spent preparing for class and teaching, evening
system long predicated on a mode of learning that exists outside the familiar sticks and carrots of formal education. Finally, as noted, the three points links folk high schools to higher education in an unprecedented way, symbolically transforming ‘schools for life’ into stepping-stones to college and university.\(^{11}\)

Faculty and administrators were concerned that introduction of the three credits would herald changes in the reasons why people apply to folk high schools, the type of student who enrolls, and the educational experience they anticipate. As one teacher put it, “It could sabotage our program.” Each year the Information Office for Folk High Schools (IF) surveys incoming students about their decision to enrol in the school system. In the 2000-2001 school year 20 per cent enrolled so they could explore what they wanted to do later in life; 16 per cent hoped to develop as a person; 15 per cent wanted to do something different from what they have been doing in secondary school; and only three per cent enrolled to gain the three credits.\(^{12}\) In terms of the type of student who might enrol, the three credits did seem to herald a change, at least in some schools. Staff and faculty at five of the site schools said their applicant pool was less diverse than in the past: students applying tend to be wealthier, more academically successful and more clearly oriented toward higher education and professional careers.

While there is little evidence in our research that the three credits leads students to expect a different kind of experience from that which folk high schools traditionally offer, teachers report struggling harder each year to generate students’ interest and enthusiasm for coursework and activities not graded:

> It is always a challenge to make things serious, not like playing at school, not like a kind of entertainment. For some students, they are so fed up with the school and they love to be entertained, and to make it serious, to make it useful for them, for their daily future life, I think that is a challenge. (Teacher)

> That’s very exciting for Americans…A school with no grades! That is, of course, a big challenge, especially in motivation. They are so trained from high school that there are grades everywhere. That’s why they learn it – they don’t understand any other reasons for learning, than getting a good grade. And that’s terrible…Our teachers have to teach students to think differently, to forget high school, forget grades, forget everything you have done….Now you have to experience it all from another level. (Teacher-Administrator)

> You have to “sell,” in a way, every lesson. It’s not like an ordinary school where you’re told from above that this is something you must do. I think that makes it easier in some ways because the students know, “Ok, I have to do this.” And the teachers know it’s something they have to do, and you try to do it as well as you can. But here, it’s even more difficult. Every lesson has to be sold. (Teacher)

and weekend residence, and participation in social activities and study trips. Most administrators we spoke with seemed to be making a symbolic “good faith” effort to keep track of employees’ time, but one principal, struggling with a teaching staff resistant to the lifestyle obligations of the job, was compiling (literally) a minute-by-minute log of their whereabouts and activities.

\(^{11}\) This linkage is visible in other ways as well. For example, folk high school administrators report that applicants are more likely to be enrolled in general studies than vocational studies in upper secondary school. In addition, folk high school students are more likely to have well-educated parents. Over 50% of folk high school students have parents with college or university experience, compared to only 37% of upper secondary students (Statistics Norway).

\(^{12}\) When asked why they chose a particular school, 56% of students referred to the subjects and coursework offered; 13% said the geographic location of the school appealed to them; 9% said the school’s brochure was attractive; and 8% said the school had been recommended to them by others (administrator, IF).
A final challenge facing the folk high school system is the tension between its two main branches: IKF and IF, or ‘Christian’ and ‘non-Christian’ schools. As noted earlier, the folk school movement in the mid-1800s, while based in Christian values and Grundtvig’s belief in the path toward spiritual enlightenment, generated a counter-movement of youth schools with strong ties to conservative Christian churches. As the result of legislative changes in the late 1940s the youth schools were transformed into folk high schools. Today there exist two different administrative offices in Oslo that cooperate on marketing, recruitment and publicity (and also coordinate the teachers’ union) but ultimately have different philosophies and goals:

We are working very closely with the Christian schools…but we have a diversity in thinking. The owners of the Christian schools would like to see them more geared toward Christian life. And that overlaying vision or philosophy, we don’t have…Our schools are more Grundtvig-like. (Administrator, IF)

We like to put it in a positive way, when you come to [a] Christian folk high school you know what you’re coming to, it is going to be…a Christian experience. [But we] do not see measurable results in terms of so many saved souls, so many people joining [the] church, so many new pastors coming out of it, that kind of thing…If you go to other schools, you will get another kind of experience…We all agree that there is nothing to be gained by hoping for failure from the other branch. So, we are willing to get along. (Administrator, IKF)

At each of the schools we visited (three IF and three IKF) we asked about differences, if any, between the two types of schools. Responses were mixed:

It’s not that I’m negative to the Christians, but they are, in actual meaning of the word, not folk high schools because they became folk high schools…I think we are really close to what Grundtvig meant with the folk high school and I think the more Christian schools have perhaps more problem with accepting differences and [non-Christian] pupils. (Teacher-Administrator, IF school)

I think that [the distinction] is a little bit artificial…The aim of this school is supposed to bring youth to personal acceptance of God. The question is, how do you do that? We don’t [teach] religion, we don’t teach Bible knowledge, [it’s not] “hammer Jesus Christ into your head” or anything like that. (Teacher-Administrator, IKF school)

Some of the Christian folk high schools have been accused, perhaps rightfully so, [of] thinking of the school as…a means to evangelize…whereas many of the NF schools like to think they’re not a means to anything, they are the fulfillment, the school is the fulfillment…My view is very close to the IF view. The school and the development of each student and their freedom to choose what they want their lives to be is basic, very basic to us…Grundtvig said as a folk high school you’re not supposed to preach about the light, Jesus being the light…but you are supposed to tell about what you see from the light…I try to have that as a hook. (Teacher-Administrator, IKF school)

Most of those interviewed predict the two strands would merge into one within the next decade, though there were mixed responses to this potential change:

I think we will see these two organizations coming together as one because we’re in a school that has to fight for our right to exist as towards the government, and then we would have much more force to talk about or to negotiate better positions for our schools if we stay together, and pedagogically there is very few problems concerning that now. (Teacher, IKF school)

The term “Christian school” erroneously implies that other schools have no basis in religious or spiritual doctrine, and/or are “anti-Christian”; however, we adopt this terminology since it is widely used within the folk high school system itself. As noted above, enrollment is down throughout the folk high school system and is declining more rapidly in IKF schools, due largely to the growing secularization among Norwegian youth.
We have these two organizations…and some have…said that we can go together…I think we are different, and I don’t think [NF] would like to join us either, because it’s a bit frightening with [our] Christianity…There’s not a problem, but I think we feel best if we are like we are. (Teacher-Administrator, IKF school)

Taken together, these tensions and challenges point to the dynamic nature of the folk high school movement. Founded in the mid-1800s, in part, as a critique of classical education, the folk high school movement has struggled throughout its existence to offer an alternative to mainstream traditions, while at the same time incorporating (however reluctantly) some hegemonic practices. So, although the philosophical principles of the folk high school system are a necessary departure from broader educational directives, they are not sufficient in ensuring its survival. Folk high schools do not endure simply because they offer an alternative to government-sponsored education. Rather, folk high schools have evolved in ways that ensure their connectedness to ever changing social contexts without completely undermining their original purposes. The result is that the folk high school experience is meaningful, not because it is separate from contemporary social life, but rather because it informs it and prepares students to engage in it. In the next section we explore the connection between the structure of the folk high schools and the meanings that are created by students’ experiences with it. We suggest that one of the unintended consequences of this articulation between structure and meaning is that folk high schools tend to facilitate the socialization processes they reject in principle.

**Transitioning**

At the heart of the supposed education crisis of the 1980s and 1990s in the United States was the belief that high schools fail to prepare adequately students for the world of paid labour (see Giroux, 1984; Ray & Mickelson, 1993). In particular, school reformists argued that graduates entering the labour force lack basic skills, motivation and discipline, and hold inappropriate or unproductive attitudes toward work. Similar arguments have taken place in Norway. Researchers conducting a comprehensive review of the Norwegian education system in the late 1980s commented, “we were told more than once that the educational sector is somewhat divorced from the activities of firms and the needs of the labour market…[Employers] did not feel they had sufficient influence over teachers and local authorities”. (OECD, 1990 p.15)

Sociological research identifies a number of different factors shaping the education-occupation association, including broad social norms and expectations about work, the quality of educational systems that prepare students for work, the vocationally oriented choices available for students and the involvement of guidance counsellors. The single most important (and typically overlooked) factor is the nature of the labour force itself (Kerckhoff, 2001; Krei & Rosenbaum, 2001; Ray & Mickelson, 1993, Rosenbaum, 1996). As this research clearly indicates, students’ attitudes and motivation toward employment might best be explained by factors typically overlooked by the corporate sector and those calling for school reform: the types of jobs available to students with a high school degree. Ray and Mickelson (1993) argue that United States high school students’ motivation for work is low because the entry-level jobs available to them are patently unappealing (low pay, status and power, little chance for advancement, etc.). In their detailed analysis of a school reform task force process, the authors conclude, “Not one [task force] member linked the…lack of motivation and discipline among non-college-bound youths with the kinds of jobs that companies have eliminated and created over the past several years” (Ray & Mickelson, 1993 p.7). In addition, research confirms that employers are more interested in (and “dismayed” by) behavioural and attitudinal traits of young job applicants than by student achievement, giving high school students little incentive to strive for academic success (Rosenbaum, 1996; Ray & Mickelson, 1993).
Literature on the high-school-to-college transition documents similar limitations in the various competencies (cognitive, psychological, attitudinal, moral etc.) of students on the threshold of adulthood. While some students obviously have no difficulties adjusting to college life, others struggle to succeed academically and find a home in their new environment and still others fail to adapt and drop out. As Baxter-Magolda notes, “Campuses across the United States are plagued with alcohol and drug abuse, lack of civility among students (for example, date rape, hazing, discrimination), eating disorders, and mental health concerns” (2000 p.141; see also Ezezek, 1994; Feenstra et. al., 2001; Holmbe & Wandrei, 1993; Kegan, 1994).

In her extensive work on the adolescent-to-adult transition in contemporary America, Baxter-Magolda (1998, 1999, 2000) argues that constructing an adult identity is becoming increasingly confusing and complicated, but the need for complex adult identities is growing (1999 p.630; see also Hall, Williamson & Coffey, 1998). Through a longitudinal study of how students come to understand themselves in relation to knowledge, Baxter-Magolda finds that adult life increasingly requires the capacity for “self-authorship” – or “the ability to collect, interpret and analyse information and reflect on one’s own beliefs in order to form judgments” (1998 p.143). Self-authorship involves cognitive, inter-personal and intra-personal dimensions of development and entails trusting oneself, the confidence to direct one’s own life, making one’s own meaning out of life experiences (i.e. developing an internal voice and personal authority), and maintaining one’s own identity (1998 p.147).

Baxter-Magolda argues that higher education has a responsibility to assist young adults in making the transition from adolescence to adulthood, “from being shaped by society to shaping society in their role as society’s future” (1999 p.630).

Because one of the major goals of higher education is to prepare citizens for effective participation and leadership in contemporary society, higher education should contribute to the development of self-authorship...Educators must find ways for students to practice the kind of learning and thinking that our society demands of us as adults. (Baxter-Magolda, 1998 p.144, 155)

While college mission statements routinely address key elements of self-authorship, aiming to empower graduates to be self-initiating, balance individual and community needs and be civic-minded, mature and responsible adults, campus efforts to promote these capacities are rare (Baxter-Magolda, 2000 p.155). As a result, most United States college graduates have not yet acquired internal identities and self-authorship, although most of the occupational and social settings they enter after graduation expect them to function as if they have (Baxter-Magolda, 1999 p.641; see also Lowman, 1990).

**Lessons in self-authorship from the folk high school experience**

Interview data provides suggestive evidence that Norwegian folk high schools are cultivating the adult skills called for in the high-school-to-college and school-to-work transitions, and at an age prior to any collegiate or adult work experience its graduates might have. By constructing an environment in which learning is voluntary, intrinsically rewarding and geared toward real-life knowledges and skills, folk high schools tap into the peripheral parts of adult education that are difficult to quantify and not purposively oriented toward larger academic or economic goals (Mortensen, 1976 p.499). In the words of teachers and administrators:

It is a very complicated issue. Primarily, we do not want to...say that we are functional schools, and that we promote [job] skills...The idea is growth. The skill is the vehicle. We
teach using subjects as a vehicle. That begs the question, what do we teach? Basically, human skills...we try to help people grow. (Administrator, IKF)

They have been in the school system for twelve years, with exams. They haven't had the freedom to choose what they wished to do. They are tired, and they're not sure what...they want to be. “What are my abilities, what do I want?” We are then offering a time, and they’re coming to us voluntarily, I think that is important, to investigate themselves. (Administrator, IF office)

Basically we would like to think [we are helping to create] better people, everything that human life incorporates...That sounds rather philosophical, doesn’t it? But you realize it’s rather a practical way of doing it. We always ask ourselves this question, Is this good for them as people?...Will it improve their lives as a whole, bring some kind of meaning to their whole lives? (Teacher-Administrator)

The folk high school students we spoke with offer a surprisingly unified message about what they have learned over the course of the year:

- You have people around you 24 hours a day, you share a room with someone, and you have a lot of people around you everywhere, always, wherever you go. And that can be hard but that is also a very good thing, because then you...really learn a lot about yourself and how you respond to different things...It’s not always easy...Some [things] are bad and some are good, and I think that’s a great lesson for life. (Female Student)
- [At folk high school you have] the opportunity to do things your way...It’s difficult to live so close to people [but] you evolve as a person socially...Respect, tolerance, patience, and I think that’s the best thing about folk high schools, that you evolve as a person and it’s easier to deal with problems you face later in life...Sometimes it’s very difficult to get through it, but you do. And when you get through it then you have learned a lot. (Male Student)
- [My] parents, they always want me to take higher education, but they always told me to take a break to go to folk high school because then you can really make sure this is what you want...[Here I can] discover Norway and discover myself...I’ve learned to handle problems...in my own way, without help from my family. It has been tough because you live so close to many people that you don’t normally mix with... If I went straight to college I [would] be reading, and reading and reading...I want to read, and read and read, but I also want to live...I think this year has made me ready to go on. (Female Student)

While students were not without criticism of their experiences (for example, rules, food, curfew) they repeatedly emphasized the positive value of the year. They appreciate the time and supportive environment in which to reflect on their futures, the close relationships with teachers and fellow students, and the ability to explore their intrinsic interests without connection to extrinsic rewards. They believe the experience has given them better communication, conflict management and decision-making skills, enhanced respect for others, greater tolerance for diversity, and more confidence about who they are as individuals and what their futures might hold.

This newly developed intra and interpersonal maturity and self-authorship (to use Baxter-Magolda’s terms) helps prepare folk high school graduates for higher education and the labour

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14 The relationship of subject courses to the folk high school mission has lead to an interesting debate. Historically, students did not enroll in folk high schools to learn about particular subject matter (i.e. students did not apply to specific subject programs). As earlier quotes imply, simply being at the school was the experience, was the education. Formalized subjects were introduced in the 1980s during severe economic depression in Norway as a new way of marketing the schools to potential applicants. Of ongoing debate is the question of which subjects can adequately serve as the vehicle for the enhancement of inter- and intra-personal maturity. As one teacher queried, Can golf? Can surfing? Of particular concern at present are the extremely popular sport, leisure and outdoor life courses featured in many folk high schools.
force, even though (as noted earlier) this is adamantly not the schools’ purpose. We were told with pride that an administrator at a university in England favours graduates of Norwegian folk high schools “because they’re much better students, because they know what they’re going to do when they start a course, and they finish it...Students from folk high schools...are more mature and they know what they’re going to do” (Teacher-Administrator). Similarly, an administrator at IF told of a corporate director in Oslo who, with extensive experience interviewing young adults, said she “could very easily see that those who had folk high school in their background were those who came to work on time and stayed and had a better attitude, more happy, and more productive.” While the evidence is merely anecdotal (none of the schools we visited keep detailed records of students’ trajectory after completing the year), administrators, teachers and students believe in the tangible usefulness of a folk high school experience:

“Our main goal is to enlighten people and to help them live meaningful, self-independent life in happiness, or to have an appetite for life. To recognize the mystery of life and participate in it...But of course, that will in the next step mean that the effect will be that you are also doing a job or study more carefully because you see the meaning associated with it. (Administrator, IF)

We think that if we give them an awareness of each other and how...the environment between students [is] and an awareness of their own role in that, where they can be active, contributing, sharing their views even though it disagrees with the others...If we manage that here it will spread to wherever they go...We're not training carpenters, we're training better carpenters. (Teacher-Administrator)

An American high school graduate who was attending folk high school before heading to college in the United States explains:

At college I’m going to have to start the freshman classes...and that’s going to be a challenge because I didn’t do that good in high school...I guess college is...my time to learn, so I have to prepare myself for it. [In folk high school] I’ve learned to be more concentrated on doing things. [I’ve learned that] if you want to do something easy and just throw something together, that’s not hard. But if you want to get something really good done...it’s going to be a challenge.

Evidence also suggests that the meaning of folk high school experience becomes more apparent over time, with alumni reporting two, five or ten years after completion that they finally appreciate what the folk schools taught them. Explained one teacher-administrator, “If we talk to them later on [they say] ‘now we understand what we learned’...Sometimes we think they should have learned it while they were here but it’s not like that!”

**CONCLUSION: FOLK HIGH SCHOOLS AS “SCHOOL RECOVERY”**

The transition to adulthood is a process, not an event, with the journey increasingly confusing and complicated (Baxter-Magolda, 1999; Kerckhoff, 2001). Perhaps the single most valuable lesson from the folk high school experience is the importance of sustained personal reflection about one’s identity, future life trajectory and relations with others that takes place in a supportive learning community. In many ways, Grundtvig’s original mission seems more timely than ever. A clear theme in the interviews with both teachers and students is the necessity of what might be termed ‘school recovery’: intellectual and emotional recovery from the gruelling academic routine of exams, grades and extrinsically defined educational goals. Folk high schools offer time off (at government expense no less) from the so-called ‘rat race’ of compulsory schooling, to help develop the intellectual, emotional and relational capacities that will serve one best in adult life. The individual maturity and eagerness to learn that are necessary to thrive in higher education, as well as the attitudinal and behavioural expectations demanded by the corporate sector of young
employees, are the very qualities cultivated in Norway’s folk high schools – despite Grundtvig’s insistence that they be schools for life and nothing else.

Attaining adult status varies cross-culturally, and the experiences of young Norwegians in the folk high school system is not always transferable to other cultures with different educational systems. There are, however, clear implications of the folk high school experience for the United States context. Research confirms that high school guidance counsellors and vocational teachers in the United States find it difficult to advise work-bound students (e.g. Krei & Rosenbaum, 2001). The increasing trend toward credentialism means that virtually all students receive the same advice (enroll in college), leaving work-bound students marginalized in the high school counselling and advising process, uncertain of their future path, and often lacking key skills such as motivation, self-discipline and the ability to work collaboratively. College-bound students have a difficult transition as well, attempting to thrive in a more demanding academic environment, make new interpersonal connections, forge a desirable career trajectory (for some), and develop an adult identity. In many ways, the growth of student affairs and the rising economic cost of student mental health services in the United States represents a reactive approach to students’ lack of preparation for higher education and beyond. Folk high schools, in contrast, represent a proactive approach, allowing young adults the time and support to question “Who am I? What do I want out of my life? What is right for me?” It is apparent that a legitimate, institutionalised form of “school recovery” was important to the participants in our study. Perhaps we should now consider what lessons from the folk high school movement might be instructive beyond the Scandinavian context.

REFERENCES


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