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ABSTRACT

Sweden's 136 folk high schools are open to anyone over 18 years of age. Established in Denmark in 1844, folk high schools were introduced to Sweden in 1968. Folk high schools can be attributed to the educational ideas of Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783-1872), who wanted to see education where people learned from their experiences as well as from books and where they learned to think and speak for themselves and solve problems. All folk high schools in Sweden run a general education course that is designed for adults who have not completed secondary education and that can lead directly to a university. Specialist and various short courses are also offered. Although folk high schools still reflect the concepts espoused by Grundtvig, they have been under pressure to change in response to the demands of the economic rationalist state, including funding cuts and the requirement that additional courses must be self-funding. Perhaps the greatest threat to folk high schools is the move away from a focus on community and belonging to 'a people' or 'folk' and towards the individual. Although much of what happens in adult education in Australia and Sweden is similar, adult education appears to be a much more integral part of the Swedish education system than of the Australian education system. (MN)

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Folk high schools – an important part of adult education in Sweden

*by **Jan Hagston**, Jan visited Sweden in January 2000 and was lucky enough to visit a number of folk high schools, the Nordic Folk Academy and the Education Department at the University of Gothenborg. She also sat in on classes, talked to students, teachers, principals, university lecturers and students about adult education in Sweden. Jan is one of the coordinators of ARIS.*

The students laugh and chat as they work, helping one another when someone gets stuck or doesn't know how to spell a word. Sometimes they ask their teacher. They are writing a response to a short story they have just read together. This could be an adult literacy class anywhere in Australia – but in this case the students and teacher are Swedish.

I am sitting at the back of an adult literacy class in a folk high school in Gothenborg, Sweden. There are eight students in the group and they range in ages from about 18 years to mid 40s. They are all full-time students at the folk high school and are enrolled in a general education course designed for those who have not completed school. All students in the general education course do Swedish, English, maths, computing and a number of other subjects which vary according to their interests and what they hope to do in the future. This group has extra Swedish classes because they have literacy problems. At the break, over coffee, they tell me that this is their first year at the folk high school. Some want to go on to university after completing three years of education at the folk high school, others want to finish their schooling to get a better job, to increase their self esteem or to help their families.

On another occasion I sit in on a different adult literacy class. These students, also full-time, have more severe literacy and numeracy problems and are spending a year working on improving their skills in these areas. They will also spend some time improving their English and computing skills. At the end of the year some will go on to the general education course at this or another folk high school, others will return to work or seek employment. All are present because they can see the benefits of improving their literacy, numeracy and English skills.

PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS OF FOLK HIGH SCHOOLS

The folk high school that these students attend is one of 136 in Sweden. Folk high schools are open to anyone over 18 years of age. They operate throughout the Nordic countries and, more recently, in the Baltic States. They first began in Denmark in 1844 and were introduced to Sweden in 1868. Folk high schools can be attributed to the educational ideas of Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783 – 1872). Grundtvig was a Danish priest, historian, poet and an educator. He received a traditional education, much of it in Latin where he learned by rote and crammed for exams. This experience influenced his ideas on education, leading him to question the value of traditional education, in that it had a "stupefying and deadly boring effect" (Knudsen 1976) on young people. Grundtvig wanted to see education where young people learnt from their experiences not just from books and where they learnt to think and speak for themselves and solve problems. Grundtvig also saw traditional education as elitist, believing that the use of Latin in schools restricted education to the upper classes (Siesto 1998: 6). He maintained that

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education should be conducted in Danish to help dissipate the gap between the different classes.

Grundtvig also championed adult education, arguing that it should be available to all Danish adults, regardless of class or occupation. He wanted adults from different backgrounds to learn from each other, discuss, debate and come to a greater understanding of each other's opinions and experiences. Based on his study of traditional styles of living and learning, Grundtvig came to the conclusion that much learning takes place when people live together. Over dinner or sitting around at night people chat, discuss and tell stories. Through this they learn from each other. They also learn about each other and different lifestyles and through this become more tolerant and understanding. Grundtvig therefore argued that it was essential for schools for adults to be residential so that students could spend time together outside class as well as in class.

"The verbal exchange of ideas and information and the active demonstration of skills rather than the passive reception of knowledge via lectures" (Christie 1995: 188) was another key concept in the type of education Grundtvig wanted to see for adults. This further emphasised the sharing of experiences and information and took the emphasis away from the teacher as the font of all knowledge. The emphasis on the exchange of ideas and information was particularly timely as throughout Europe the concept of representative government was being widely debated. The proposed 'schools for life' for adults were to allow for the dissemination of information on such ideas and for these ideas to be critically debated.

Another important concept in Grundtvig's ideas was the emphasis on Danish culture, language, history and government. Through learning about their own culture and history and in their own language, individuals would develop a sense of a national character and of belonging to 'a people' or 'a folk'. While these ideas can seem to be nationalistic, they also can be seen to strengthen the concept of community and the importance of acting for the good of the community. This concept of strengthening the Danish language and culture was timely, coming at a time when Prussia posed a threat to Denmark and Danish culture.

Perhaps as a result of the Prussian threat and the growing debate about representative government, Grundtvig's ideas were, generally, well received and in 1844 the first 'school for life' for adults was established. These schools for life were called folk high schools.

Initially the folk high schools developed in rural areas, not surprising since at that time Denmark relied heavily on agriculture and a large proportion of the population was involved in farming activities. It was common for residential courses to run for 5 months over winter, when little work could be done on farms.

Today there are about 400 folk high schools in the Nordic countries; approximately 135 of these are in Sweden. Their role is to promote general civic education and they are run by non-government organisations such as local municipalities and county councils, churches, temperance societies and trade unions. Many of these organisations have a strong ideological base and are committed to some form of social change. They receive funding from the government to operate the folk high schools, which inevitably means some restrictions on the courses they operate. Tuition is free and students receive a substantial study allowance or grant.

All folk high schools in Sweden run a general education course for those who have not completed secondary education. Core subjects are Swedish, maths and English (or another language) but other subjects vary from one folk high school to another. There is no standard curriculum. Based on the school's ideology and the needs of students, each school makes its own decisions about the subjects and curriculum to be taught.

General education courses can lead straight to university. There are no exams and students wanting to go on to university are accepted on the basis of their teachers' recommendations and report. The tradition of not having exams can also be attributed to Grundtvig, who argued that students should concentrate on communicative and cooperative learning (Christie 1995: 190) not the type of learning required to pass exams.

Folk high schools also offer specialist courses. At one school you can study arts and crafts, at another music, how to become a recreation leader or how to build traditional boats. They also offer a variety of short courses.

Inevitably folk high schools have changed over time. In each country in which they operate, they have a slightly different 'flavour' and even within a country each folk high school is unique. But the basic concepts that Grundtvig espoused still form the basic philosophy of the folk high schools. Most are residential, although those in the large cities are likely to be day schools. This living and studying together still creates a sense of community and allows for the type of interaction and debate that Grundtvig believed was so important. For example, at one residential folk high school I visited, students standing in the corridor, discussed the identity and language of people from different Nordic countries with the folk high school principal. The free exchange of ideas, learning from each other and gaining an appreciation for the ideas and experiences of other's is as important today as it was in the 1800s. So too is the ability to question and critically evaluate information and ideas, particularly given the amount of information we are bombarded with each day.

To encourage debate, problem solving and critical reflection, thematic and problem oriented teaching is adopted, at least in theory and often in practice, by many of the folk high schools. This type of teaching/learning also enables different experiences, knowledge and skills to be utilised and valued and takes the emphasis away from the teacher as the 'provider' of all knowledge.

PROBLEMS FACING FOLK HIGH SCHOOLS

Like educational organisations in all western countries, the folk high schools in Sweden have been under some pressure to change to meet the demands of the economic rationalist state. There have been cuts to funding and ceilings put on courses funded by the government. Additional courses must be self funding. The government has 'bought' courses for certain groups of students, particularly migrants and refugees. These factors have led to competition between folk high schools. There is also increased pressure from the universities for students to sit for exams or to receive a grade.

But perhaps the greatest threat to the folk high school is the move away from a focus on community and belonging to 'a people' or 'folk'. "The idea of the people is no longer a key concept for . . . general education . . . ." (Korsgaard 1998: 22). As in many western countries, the individual has become the centre of attention. "It has become the ideal that each individual has his/her own goal and aim" (Korsgaard 1998: 22) and that each individual has a right to achieve their person goals and aims at the expense of the community, the people. At the very least this could change the focus of folk high schools, it could also challenge the relevance of their philosophical base for the 21st century.

AN AUSTRALIAN REFLECTION

In Sweden adult education is accepted as an integral part of education, it has the support of the government and is well resourced (beyond our wildest dreams).

> *"An important characteristic of general adult education is that education is seen as a value in itself. People are offered knowledge and experiences that can change their way of thinking. It is a general premise that one should be an active agent in social change."*
>
> (The Nordic Folk High School Organizations 1994: 2)

Adult education also has a strong philosophical base, one which was articulated, in different ways, by all that I met – including the students. Teachers here would agree with much of what I have described in this article and much of what happened in the classroom is very similar to what happens in adult education classrooms in Australia. But there is a difference between what happens in adult education in Sweden and what happens in Australia. Why is adult education such an integral part of the Swedish education system when in Australia it is still the Cinderalla sector?

Since returning from Sweden, I have been grappling to identify the differences between adult education in the two countries and the reasons for them. I'm not sure that I have come to any conclusions but I think there are a few significant factors. The first is that adult educators in Sweden have a long identifiable tradition and strongly identify with a particular philosophy. This enables them to articulate why adult education is important, why they do certain things and also sets a framework for teaching practice. Another major factor is the acceptance, at all levels, including the broad community and the government, that education is valuable in itself. The community accepts and encourages participation in all aspects of adult education, not just those related to work. A third factor is the acceptance that education is, and should be, about sharing, questioning, critical thinking and problem solving. This is seen as a basis for a truly democratic country.

No doubt many people in Australia would agree with all these sentiments, but the reality is that they haven't and don't translate into practice in Australia – they do in Sweden.

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