Education as change: Liberation from mental illness and self-stigma in favour of empowerment

Joel Hedegaard

Martin Hugo

The purpose of this article is to describe how education can serve as a changing and liberating process for adults with long-term mental illness. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 participants in Life-knowledge and Creative courses at a Swedish Folk High School. Five themes emerged in the interviews: (i) A meaningful social context – to undergo change with others; (ii) Self-awareness via non-violent communication – to change one's self-image; (iii) Creating as rehabilitation – change through aesthetic learning processes; (iv) To function better in everyday life – to receive confirmation of change; (v) Opportunity horizons – to change hope for the future. The conclusion is that the Folk High School environment and the educational courses can contribute to an increased sense of well-being in the present. The liberating process primarily impacts the participants' self-stigma positively as long as this takes place in environments where the participants have experience of not being exposed to social stigma, either at home or at the Folk High School. The participants do not entertain future life plans that extend beyond the context of Folk High School, but when examined in the light of their situation before they

enrolled at Folk High School, the liberating process is still noticeable.

Keywords: *empowerment, Folk High School, liberating education, mental illness, self-stigma*

Introduction

This article focuses on the Folk High School and its role in the recovery of adults who suffer from long-term mental illness and their increased participation in society. Mental illness is a generic term that includes mild psychological illness and psychiatric disorders. Irrespective of the nature of the mental illness, it often entails that the person who suffers from such illness experiences difficulties in functioning in their everyday life, especially concerning their relationships and work-life (Tudor, 1996). In the EU, it is reported that, on average, 11 per cent of the population suffers from a psychological illness. The same figure of 11 percent is reported in Sweden, too (OECD & European Commission, 2020). Conversely, 87 percent of the Swedish population claimed that they enjoyed 'good' or 'very good' psychological health in 2020 (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2021). In addition to the suffering that this level of mental illness or lack of psychological well-being entails for individuals, the social cost incurred by psychological illnesses in 2010 was 10,900 billion Swedish Krona (direct and indirect costs included) within the OECD. This cost is expected to rise to 26,400 billion Swedish Krona in 2030 (Bloom et al., 2011).

At the Folk High School studied, they offer so-called *Livskunskaps- och Skaparkurser* [Life-knowledge and Creative courses], which are aimed at adults with long-term mental illnesses. These people are often on sick leave during extended periods and find themselves isolated from the rest of society and experience great difficulty in re-entering the labour market. In each course that is offered, 16 places are allocated for participants, and when a participant leaves the course, the vacant spot can be immediately filled by a new participant. Consequently, enrolment in a particular course may not be constant during the duration of the course. The courses are time-tabled for a couple of days per week. Creative activities of various types are offered in the Creative courses, including image creation, drawing, sculpture, painting, paint mixing,

and ceramics. In the Life-knowledge courses, we find various activities that include philosophy, existential questions, and the participants' self-awareness. For example, scheduled activities include group conversations about psychological illness, healthcare, non-violent communication (Rosenberg, 2015), and *rounds* – a 'salutogenic' activity (Antonovsky, 1987) where participants report to each other what is positive in their lives at that moment. For these courses, continuous attendance is obligatory for the scheduled activities and for partaking in lunch with one's classmates and the teacher. The two other criteria that must be met before a candidate is accepted to these courses are: (i) the participant must hold documentation proving that they are free from drug misuse for at least one year, and (ii) they have access to a professional therapist outside the school. The aim of these courses is that the participants' work that they do on these courses will function as a pathway to recovery from mental illness.

Many educations aimed at people with mental illness have their basis in psychiatry such as Supported Education (Anthony & Unger, 1991; Waghorn et al., 2004). Other educations aimed at promoting mental health often have individual educational profiles such as art/creativity (Potash et al., 2018; Spring et al., 2017), coping and self-awareness (Lean et al., 2019; Whitley et al., 2019) and liberation (Riemer, 2020). In the present article, the previously mentioned profiles coexist within one and the same education at the Folk High School. Moreover, as the Folk High School is a school form that focuses on building and a sense of community (Andersén, 2011; Paldanius, 2007), it offers a complex educational environment for studying recovery from mental illness. Thus, the purpose of this article is to describe how education at the Folk High School can serve as a changing and liberating process for adults with long-term mental illness. The description is primarily based on the participants' perspectives and experiences.

The Folk High School

Popular Adult Education in Sweden is characterised by a heterogeneous system of *operations* where the Folk High School and the Adult Study Association constitute the framework. Despite having different approaches and content, the actors within the Popular Adult Education system demonstrate a broad conception of a shared set of values and a collaborative perspective in their operations (Bjursell & Nordvall,

2016). This shared set of values includes voluntary life-long learning for every individual that is based on a holistic perspective of human beings and the context in which they find themselves. Knowledge and education have their own intrinsic value and emerge in cooperative action that supports people's participation in democracy, nationally and internationally. The Folk High School system, an important part of Popular Adult Education, has been described as holding a unique position in the Swedish education system due to its social and meaningful dimensions, through which the interest is directed to the whole person, and the knowledge and learning that is provided are related to a person's whole life situation (Andersén, 2011; Paldanius, 2007). Personal development and the individual's experience of what is considered to be meaningful are thus central (Paldanius, 2007). At the Folk High School, the students are called 'participants', and not, as is usually the case, 'students', 'pupils', or 'learners'. This nomenclature is based on the Folk High Schools' principles of freedom and voluntariness, where participants are viewed as co-creators in processes that are based on people's equal value (Andersén, 2011). Because the Folk High School is not regulated in the Swedish Education Act, it avoids much of the control that many other school forms are exposed to and this is shown, for example, by the fact that they do not have grades but instead an overall study assessment (The Swedish National Council of Adult Education, 2020). All in all, the Folk High School differs from many other forms of education, which may be a reason why the participants prosper so well and are reluctant to leave but continues to study at other Folk High School courses. Hugo and Hedegaard (2021) have described it as a kind of institutionalization, that leaving the Folk High School may be associated with uncertainty.

Folk High Schools have existed in the Nordic countries since 1844 and the first two Folk High Schools in Sweden started in 1868 (Runesdotter, 2010). Currently, there are 156 Folk High Schools in Sweden, with approximately 150 000 participants each year. These schools are operated by ideal-driven organisations, local government, associations such as County Councils, folk movements including the sobriety and labor movements together with religious movements, and foundations (Statistiska Centralbyrån, 2019; Sveriges Folkhögskolor, 2020). Half of the Folk High Schools' funding is covered by government grants, whilst the remainder is funded by other organizations, foundations,

and municipalities. Approximately 57,000 participants are enrolled in general courses, which corresponds to upper secondary school and approximately 54,000 participants are enrolled in specialized courses that have aesthetic content, or are vocational courses, which corresponds to university (The Swedish National Council of Adult Education, 2018). One third of all participants enrolled in the general courses have a functional impairment (The Swedish National Council of Adult Education, 2017). The Folk High School has a long tradition of arranging courses to include and promote education for people with different needs, for example, people with disabilities, seniors, and people who did not succeed at school. According to Skogman (2015) and Nylander et al. (2015), the Folk High School is characterised by openness and accessibility, which facilitates the learning of participants with different types of needs. For example, we note that the proportion of participants with disabilities and psychological illnesses has increased during the 2000s at the Folk High School (Folkbildningsrådet, 2018).

Education and health

The connection between education and health or well-being is significant and has been the subject of numerous studies for many decades (Bremberg, 2016; Fuchs, 1979; Jorgenson, 1967; Leigh, 1983). Not until the 1980s were the direct and indirect effects of education on health first researched and it was then claimed that indirect effects, in terms of a person's lifestyle and career choice, have the most influence on a person's health. By engaging in education, the individual can use the resources that are made available to them because they enjoy better working conditions and higher social status, for example, which, in turn, can promote health. These circumstances cause the individual's "health efficiency" to increase (Bremberg, 2016; Leigh, 1983). The Commission on Social Determinants of Health, World Health Organization (2008) has recommended that member countries focus on increasing levels of educational attainment, primarily for those who have the lowest levels of attainment. However, even though educational attainment levels have generally increased during recent decades, the importance of education for health/well-being has increased even more (Mackenbach, et al., 2016). This increase suggests that opportunities to behave in a "health efficient" manner have primarily been exploited by the highly-educated and by those with good access to resources, whilst those who do not have access to resources or

enjoy only limited resources find it more challenging to achieve "health efficiency". As emphasised by Bremberg (2016), it is not sufficient to merely increase the general level of education when both the resources which are made available through studying and the social status that an education endows upon a person remain limited and thus pass on only to those with the highest levels of education. Thus, there is value in offering educational programs which are aimed at individuals who lack resources and whose health has already suffered because of this.

The fact that educational programs can possess clear rehabilitative, habilitative, and preventative effects have been previously demonstrated, for example, with respect to people with high-functioning autism (Hedegaard & Hugo, 2017; Hedegaard et al., 2021; Hugo & Hedegaard, 2017; 2021), the incarcerated (Bazos & Hausman, 2004; Chapell, 2004; Gordon & Weldon, 2003; Wells, 2000), children and young people who demonstrate risk behaviours (Hugo, 2013; Vinnerljung et al., 2010), and seniors (Bjursell, 2019; Hedegaard & Hugo, 2020). These studies include educational programs with educational content which is explicitly aimed at achieving rehabilitative/habilitative effects or where the whole educational program itself is intended to constitute rehabilitation/habilitation or have a direct effect on the health of the participant (see Bremberg (2016) and Leigh (1983)). These studies also show how schools and their culture, classmates, and informal learning (learning that is not related to a specific subject) can also contribute to a person's rehabilitation/habilitation and an increased sense of well-being. Irrespective of whether the goal is to (i) create a safe, well-adjusted and socially accepting school environment for young adults with high-functioning autism, (ii) improve the individual's conditions so that they enter the labour market, thereby reducing the risk of recidivism, (iii) strengthen solidarity for children and young people who engage in risky behaviour, or (iv) provide meaningful activities for seniors, under the right circumstances education can be part of an environment that promotes health and prevents illness. Whilst many of the studies mentioned above were conducted at Folk High Schools, note that this form of education differs from the rest of the education system in Sweden. The Folk High Schools' focus on relational perspectives and experience-based learning contributes to making the Folk High School a place where the content of specific rhetorical and didactic models is not foregrounded in the same way they are in traditional school systems.

In cases where these aspects need to be highlighted, this does not occur at the expense of the relational aspects (Colliander et al., 2020). This approach informs a somewhat different school culture that has been successful in terms of inclusion and the provision of an education to people who have various needs (Kindblom, 2016; Nylander et al., 2015; Skogman, 2015). However, how education in general, and the Folk High School in particular, functions for people with mental illness has not been researched in-depth, hence the present study.

Conceptual framework

In this section, we present the three concepts which instantiate the article's conceptual framework. 'Stigma' is the first concept and is used to describe what people who have mental illness often suffer from (Ferarri et al., 2020; Tyerman, Patovirta & Celestini, 2021; Wikman, 2017), namely a form of social exclusion that is the result of an assessment of a person's social role or position in society (Goffman, 1963). Stigma is usually divided into different types and in this article, it is *social stigma* that originates from individuals and groups and *self-stigma*, that emerges when an individual incorporates the stereotypes and prejudices which other individuals and groups hold and express (Goffman, 1963; Link, 1987; Wikman, 2017), which are in focus since our study is focused on the participants' experiences of their studies and how their studies influence their self-image in the Life-knowledge and Creative courses offered by Folk High School.

The second concept that we employ is 'liberating education'. To enable rehabilitation/habilitation from mental illness and to strengthen the participants' self-reliance and self-awareness, the Folk High School employs several different methods and approaches, for example, non-violent communication, which, in some sense, operates in the spirit of liberating education. According to one of the founders of liberating education, Paulo Freire, if dialogue is to be practised, this demands that self-knowledge and a consciousness of one's surroundings be present. Freire argued that people must live in and with the world as active co-creators and that they should not be merely passive and dependent objects (Freire, 1978). From this, the development of 'critical consciousness' can be seen as essential to this program. This consciousness enables people to question the nature of their historical and social circumstances with the aim of changing their life conditions.

Liberating education is a pathway to achieving 'empowerment', our third concept. Heaney (1995) claims that Freire developed the notion of 'empowerment' via his theory of liberating education since empowerment is an immediate consequence of this approach. Liberating education and empowerment thus mutually support each other. Empowerment refers to the individual's abilities and the opportunities that are provided to the individual to practise self-determination. Consequently, empowerment is comprised of three essential components, namely power, control, and self-esteem (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 2000). Empowerment is also founded on a view of other people where the point of departure is that every person possesses resources and the capacity to define their problems and develop strategies to solve these problems. The individual is viewed as an agent and a person capable of taking control of their own lives. A person's acceptance of taking more control over their lives entails striving towards a particular way of thinking about themselves which is informed by trust in themselves and others. Empowerment can be viewed as both a process and a goal (Zimmerman, 2000). In the following study, we focus on the process and thereby direct the reader's attention towards educational aspects that positively affect the participants' self-image. However, we will also relate to empowerment as a long-term process (Wallenstein & Bernstein, 1988), beyond the participants' Folk High School studies, and thereby to some extent also pay attention to the importance of the wider environment (Archibald & Wilson, 2011).

By referencing the above concepts, we can understand the Folk High School's ambition with the two courses in the sense that *liberating education is used to change the participants' self-image, reduce self-stigmatisation, and allow them to achieve a sense of empowerment.* How this takes place is addressed below.

Method

This study is inspired by the theoretical approach employed in ethnographic studies (Geertz, 1983, 1993; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), where the researcher is present with the participants of the study in the environments and situations in which the researcher wishes to gain knowledge of. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) and Bengtsson (2005), a person's behaviour can only be understood in terms of the context in which they find themselves. Through participating

observations, and by listening to what is said and asking questions, the authors have come to understand the teaching and the participants' experience of the teaching *in the context in which it took place*. Note that the context of this study was limited to the teaching of the Life-knowledge and Creative courses at a Folk High School during the Spring and Autumn terms of 2020. We focused on the participants' experiences of how the content of these courses can help them in their recovery, rehabilitation, and achieving a changed self-image.

During the Spring and Autumn 2020, we conducted semi-structured life-world interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) with eleven participants and two focus-group interviews (Halkier, 2010; Wibeck, 2010) with the eleven participants who had completed the two courses. The length of the interviews was between 35 and 87 minutes, and they were conducted with assistance from a semi-structured interview guide (Lantz, 1993) which included pre-determined main topics of conversation. However, the respondents were given a great deal of leeway in freely describing their experiences and opinions of the courses. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Interpreting the collected data

The results of this study are closely informed by the empirical data that was collected since we aimed to provide a rich description of the respondents' experiences. In our interpretation of the interview transcripts, we identified the themes that were present in the material. According to Kvale and Brinkman (2009), research must provide an as accurate and complete description of the material as possible, or as Bengtsson (2005, 53) explains 'The empirical material should be allowed to express itself in its own terms within the framework of the question one wishes to answer'. In order to verify the transcribed interviews, the preliminary results of the study were reported and discussed at an open research seminar with the participants.

The interviews were analysed using qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) at a latent abstract level where the researchers could interpret their content (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Our purpose was to provide a detailed but succinct description of what emerged in the participants' reports (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The analysis was done in three steps (Creswell 2014; Larsen, 2009; Tesch,

1990). First, the interviews were transcribed. Next, we conducted a thorough reading of all of the interview transcripts and coded them with keywords. Third, the interviews were re-read, and content categories were created from the previously identified keywords. Five themes emerged in the interview materials: (i) A meaningful social context – to undergo change with others; (ii) Self-awareness via non-violent communication – to change one's self-image; (iii) Creating as rehabilitation – change through aesthetic learning processes; (iv) To function better in everyday life – to receive confirmation of change; (v) Opportunity horizons – to change hope for the future.

Ethical considerations

The participants were informed of the purpose of the study, and they provided their consent to participate in the study. The respondents' right to integrity entailed that they were treated and described confidentially. Consequently, the participants are referred to in this article as D1, D2, D3, and so on. In summary, the study follows the ethical requirements to which research in the humanities and social sciences are subject (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017).

Results

Our results are presented in terms of five themes regarding the participants' experiences of the Life-knowledge and Creative courses and how these courses influenced them with respect to their recovery, rehabilitation, and their achieving a changed self-image.

A meaningful social context – to undergo change with others

Most of the participants reported that they had previously been isolated at home without socialising with other people for several years before they enrolled in the Folk High School courses. What was apparent in the interviews with the participants was that most of them had experienced (for the first time in several years) that they had become part of a meaningful social context when they enrolled in the Folk High School courses. This is apparent in the following extract:

> *I've been at home for many years because of mental illness…just this thing of having a social context outside home…that you are*

> *someone...it gives you a little better self-confidence...just getting out...and there is a very welcoming atmosphere...we are all different ages, but still there's a community...irrespective of the different types of people and ages. (D7)*

Meeting with other people who are in a similar life situation and with whom one can feel a connection and sense of community was experienced by the participants as something positive and safe. Several participants reported that the new, meaningful social context was a positive influence on their whole identity. For the first time in a long time, they felt they were someone in a context with other people:

> *All of a sudden, I was in...a social context. It was really lovely...I felt good being here. Self-awareness and a context...of course, this school has contributed a lot to...or those courses...because when you end up on sick leave...exhausted...then you lose a lot of your identity. You lose your professional role...perhaps you lose a lot of friends...lots of things happen and this drags on your self-confidence and self-awareness, of course...then you end up being isolated...you don't have the energy to do anything, and you don't have a social life any longer. When you start here, you get some of that back. (D14)*

A meaningful social context also involves the experience of being seen, your existence is confirmed, and you are even missed by others:

> *Instead of going into a constant decline...and there were a few times when I didn't attend because I didn't have the energy to do so...and then they had someone call and send SMS messages and ask where I was...so it became a totally different thing when you realise that you had people who wanted you there. If you don't come, then there are people who ask...people who wonder... people who care. (D21)*

Self-awareness via non-violent communication – to change one's self-image

The participants reported that they had poor self-confidence, a negative self-awareness, and a lack of self-understanding when they initially enrolled in the courses. Most of the participants stated that the courses had helped them the most in the area of constructing a perspective of

themselves where they had become more conscious of their feelings and needs:

> *I'm a bit more comfortable with myself now [...] I have a better self-awareness...especially since I've got the tools to find out how I feel or what I need. (D4)*

> *It has helped me because I must find ways to understand myself...I feel that I've learnt a lot. I understand myself in another way today compared to earlier. (D2)*

> *I've realised that I can cope with more than I thought. To strengthen my self-confidence. Dare to believe in yourself more [...] I already feel that I've coped with more than I could've previously thought or imagined. I've discovered in myself that I dare to speak in front of a group when I don't feel forced to...you practice, of course, and you realise things about yourself. You think differently now. (D9)*

This new self-understanding, and development of better self-confidence, as described by the participants, indicates that they dared to do more and believed in themselves and their abilities. One component of the courses that the participants claimed had helped them with this improvement was *non-violent communication*. In this component, the concept of 'self-consciousness' is central. The participants described how their self-consciousness had increased as a result of participating in these activities:

> *To understand why I have poor concentration...because if you don't even understand that, then you feel almost stupid. I now understand that I must rest...I understand why I am what I am, so it's much easier [...] What's been good is that they have conversation groups with non-violent communication...they've really got me to see...what my needs are...why I behave this way...or what I actually need to do. To take yourself seriously...that your needs are important and you perhaps don't know what needs you have...if you are angry, then there's, of course, a need behind it. (D3)*

> *You learn...you get tools to think with [...] so that you're able to come back...it's healing...you see patterns in yourself. You might perhaps end up in a line of thought which isn't good for you. It's a big thing to dare to do things which you wouldn't have dared to do in another*

> *context [...] This is something that I've forgotten about on my life journey. To ask yourself: What do you need right now? (D14)*

Many participants also experienced that their increased self-awareness had contributed to them not being so hard on themselves. Instead, they could clearly see what strengths they possessed:

> *I thought that the non-violent communication was really good because it taught me a lot about how you interpret signals from others and how you deal with your own emotions. [...] To not tell yourself that you are completely nuts or to be mean towards yourself [...] I hadn't thought about that or known about that before...that the body is influenced in the same way as if you're to tell me that I'm stupid...I say the same thing to myself, so then my body reacts in the same way...and this is like a learnt behaviour [...] I've benefitted from not scolding myself so much anymore...and I've also benefitted from thinking that I do certain things correctly. (D1)*

> *To understand what went wrong and then try to prevent it from happening again. Now, I have the energy to do those things which I have problems with...that you perhaps view everything as being so negative...it was also like a switch was tripped...you often focus on the wrong things, of course...but you never focus on what you've managed to do. It's like a new way of thinking that I learned here. (D11)*

Creating as rehabilitation – change through aesthetic learning processes

Several participants stated that the activities where they created something had a calming and rehabilitating effect on them:

> *It's also really rehabilitating just to work with clay to create...in itself, it's rehabilitating, you know. (D15)*

> *Went to medical rehab at [XXXX] and it wasn't much help...but the creative course helped a lot...it contributed a great deal to my medical rehabilitation. (D14)*

Two other participants related how the creative activities that they were engaged in were relaxing, which made them feel good and contributed to their recovery:

> *Since I started, I've felt happy being here...this particular course I also felt it would be a good fit because I've been drawing and painting since I was small...and I always thought that it was really great and really relaxing...that there's a course that's aimed at recovery. (D4)*

> *I don't view myself as a creative person, but I absolutely understand what it can do for recovery now...for example, with clay or painting...you get stuck in and enter into some kind of flow which made me feel really good. It's done a lot for how I feel just to do something. (D6)*

Another participant informed us that the creative activities they had engaged in had strengthened their self-confidence and their self-awareness. She now dared to accept new challenges and activities:

> *Sometimes you get a kick out of it. I got a kick from feeling that I'd succeeded with things that I had no idea that I would be able to do...and then you dare to do something else later...it's like a staircase...your self-awareness is built up again.*

> *[...] When you start with the idea that you can't do anything and then you notice – Wow! I can actually do it! It's never too late to learn again and the dare to try something new [...] for me, this has been great to dare to do something entirely different...you know, like to completely disconnect from negative patterns and what previously ground you down. Now, I dare to start a project without being terrified of making a mistake. (D13)*

To function better in everyday life – to receive confirmation of change

Participants at the Folk High School follow a time-table for their courses and attend the school several days per week. This structure is experienced as beneficial by many participants since they could establish routines and a structure in their daily lives. Many participants mentioned that their attendance at the courses became a kind of duty, which, notably, prevented them from staying at home and sleeping throughout the week. They became part of a context at school which was vital to them. Having demands placed on them for the first time in a long time was something they aspired to live up to:

> *If you have nowhere to go to and no duty...duty is perhaps the wrong word...but no context. If you already feel that it's pretty meaningless to carry on living, well it becomes even more meaningless if you don't have anything...like, why should I get up...I've nowhere to be...then you can sleep for the whole day. (D20)*

By practising and getting used to coping with new structures and routines when one has been home alone, without a job, for a long time was described by the participants as the first significant challenge:

> *I've worked on being on time and attending...it's just three days a week but it feels burdensome anyway because I still feel tired all the time...but it's gotten better...those days when I don't have class, I lose all the routines all at once...if you don't do anything, you destroy the whole day...but when I attend the course, I'm forced to have routines and function and get started...and force myself to meet people. [...] I've started to sleep well, and so I feel very proud about that...and happy because I've got a good daily rhythm and I don't come late every day. (D8)*

Several participants reported that because they had entered into a meaningful social context and had acquired routines and structure in their lives, it became easier for them to interact with other people in their daily lives in society:

> *I feel more comfortable in all possible contexts...just going out shopping could've been paralysing before...to interact with people...was a nightmare. But today, I go out and meet people... that's really cool...to get to know new people. I've totally got back my passion for trying to understand how people function...and try to care about others and help out...and be involved. I've lost so much...you forget what it's like to be human when you aren't one for so long. So to get back part of yourself which you valued so very much when you were younger...it feels like you get back something which you thought you'd lost forever. (D21)*

Other participants stated that everyday activities and their family life had improved after attending the Folk High School courses for some time:

> *The big difference for me doesn't actually have to do with work because I'm not ready for vocational training...but with me being*

>*actually able to do the laundry at home...make sure that the kids are fed and get out of bed in the morning. My husband can go off and lecture...he does not need to be at home and do everything. This makes a huge difference for life at home. (D15)*

Opportunity horizons – to change hope for the future

The participants expressed a sense of resignation towards what they perceived as *very limited opportunities in life* before they enrolled at the Folk High School. For some of the participants, their life situations had not changed at the time of the interviews. Several other participants reported that the courses had helped them in the present moment and that they now, for the first time in many years, were able to function normally in their daily lives and could perceive new opportunities in the future. Another participant stated that the courses had opened up a new world for her; a world with broadened opportunity horizons:

>*I was on sick leave for six years before and was really just at home and felt really bad...then I started in January... everything was still really difficult...but then things got easier and easier...it felt as if someone had blown new life into me again. Everything we had to do was practical at the school...all the people you got to know. It opened up a world where it was ok to be a bit different...so I started to live again. The people in my surroundings said that too, that I'm a completely different person. So, it meant everything to me. (D18)*

Being isolated at home for many years without being part of a meaningful social context was described by one participant as if he had lost some of his human value. He was able to recover from this negative feeling during his years of study at the Folk High School:

>*I come from quite a long history of being self-isolated during the ages of 15 to 20...then I came out of my shell a little bit when I was around 20 and 21...and then I hid myself away again to the age of 26, approximately. Just being able to come here and be allowed to take your time to become social again and remember how it was to be human...you can forget that when you've been self-isolated for such a long time. Just to be allowed to come here and remember that I'm actually a person besides all the problems I*

> *have...so I'm still a person...and then there's space for that person to emerge again...I thought that that was quite nice. (D20)*

The remarks above illustrate that most of the participants felt that the Folk High School courses had helped them function better in their daily lives and together with other people. The courses helped them come to understand themselves and made them feel better *at that moment.* However, many participants remain somewhat fragile and have devastatingly low levels of self-confidence, which takes a significant amount of time to build up again before they can cope with higher demands within the context of education and work-life. This was apparent for the participants who had completed the courses sometime in the past. A little over half of the participants had enrolled in new courses and activities at the Folk High School; the rest were unemployed, in vocational training, or worked part-time. Many of the participants' plans for the future remain vague and uncertain regarding future opportunities outside the safe environment of the Folk High School:

> *Then I thought, try it...I don't know if it'll work...but to try and get a job...my old job was at a lousy company...then I worked in a care home for the seniors. But I'm a bit tired of providing care itself. I want to work during the day so I can socialise and play games and do fun things with the seniors. And if I don't get that job, then I want to work at a pre-school and see whether I'm happy with that. But I don't believe that I'll be able to cope with working five days a week for the rest of my life. But I have to make a plan and do some vocational training. (D8)*

Some of the participants described somewhat more precise and explicit plans for the future, which included studying different vocational training programs, such as becoming a social pedagog or deacon. One participant related the following:

> *During these past three terms, I've come up with a plan for the future. I'm thinking of applying to the church's foundation course. That's my goal...and, step-by-step, I've decided to become a deacon. In the Swedish Church...it's a very important role...it's a social role to help people and be a contact for conversation...I want to help people who are in some kind of difficulty. (D5)*

Notwithstanding the participants' sometimes vague and uncertain plans for the future, most of them reported that the courses at the Folk High School had strengthened their self-awareness and had given them hope for a better and more functional life. One of the participants made the following observations:

> *I'm always afraid, you might say, because I always set really high demands on myself...and I know that, in a job, things are different compared to here...you can't really say 'I pass' at a job. Instead, you have to do your work. However, I think that I'll be able to deal with it better than what I did earlier. I think that I'll dare to do more. I think so. I wouldn't say that I dare to do it hundred percent now...it's not like I've gotten better in a second. But I have more hope. And I believe too that when I've finished up here, then I believe that I'll have even more hope. (D9)*

The section above shows how the participants' opportunity horizons have been expanded and that their hopes for the future have been strengthened. However, two of the participants requested an opportunity to be able to work train during the time at the Folk High School. They believe that even if the courses help them to function better right now, they do not give them real preparation to be able to function outside the Folk High School's safe environment.

Discussion

This article has described how education can serve as a process of change and liberation for adult participants with long-term mental illness by referring to the participants' perspectives and experiences. We have been inspired by the ethnographic methodology and our participation together with the participants has been important in understanding the context that the participants described in the interviews (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

Our role as researchers is similar to Schütz's (1944/1976) description of the researcher as a "stranger" in unusual and specific environments. Crucial to data collection is, according to Schutz, the researcher's ability to be accepted by the interviewees. Our participation was also crucial to be able to be accepted by the participants and create trusting relationships that made the interviews possible. During the interviews, we were already known to them, and they felt safe talking to us.

The participants' stories and reports have highlighted the health benefits that are associated with the courses provided by the Folk High School. However, this process is not limited to the classroom and the teaching that takes place there. In fact, it also encompasses the whole of the Folk High School culture and the meaningful social context in which the participants have the opportunity to partake. These components make significant contributions to the improvements that the participants report on, as shown in previous studies (Hedegaard & Hugo, 2020; Hedegaard et al., 2021; Hugo & Hedegaard, 2021). Whilst participants must have access to a professional conversational therapist outside of the school, the educational programs and the school culture at the Folk High School also offer a form of education-based group therapy. During class teaching hours and outside the classroom, the participants can test and apply the lessons they have learnt during the courses in a tolerant atmosphere. In this way, they are able to change *along with other people.*

In addition to the meaningful social context that the Folk High School offers, specific teaching methods and approaches are used for recovery and re-orientation. Using dialogue based on the principles of non-violent communication, liberating processes are created, through which self-consciousness has been allowed to bloom as a foundation for *change in the participant's self-image.* In conjunction with this, creative activities, including image production, drawing, sculpture, painting, paint mixing, and ceramics, are used so that they can try out different materials and techniques. Participants can use what they create to reflect on their feelings, making it easier for them to articulate how they are feeling. Providing the necessary circumstances where participants can learn and understand things about themselves and their respective situations in a somewhat different light than previously also reduces their self-stigma. We thus speak of a *liberating process* (Freire, 1970) where the previous focus on the limiting influence that mental illness has on an individual's opportunities and prospects is successively replaced by a hope that the future has something positive to offer. When the participants feel that their education produces positive results, for example, they begin to function better in their everyday lives with their family and in other social contexts; then self-stigma decreases and feelings of self-confidence increase. When the participant's feelings that (i) they cannot cope with anything and (ii) they are not productive members of society (but are a burden on society, instead) are reduced,

this becomes part of the liberating process away from self-stigma and towards a sense of empowerment since they receive *confirmation of change* in their everyday lives. Empowerment provides additional power, control, and self-reliance (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 2000) and can thereby contribute to believing that the future can change for the better, i.e., *to change towards hope for the future.*

The Folk High School seems to be an educational form that is successful at improving the conditions for groups of participants who are not particularly rich in resources. In addition to cohorts of individuals with high-functioning autism (Hedegaard et al., 2021; Hugo & Hedegaard, 2021) and the seniors (Hedegaard & Hugo, 2020), we can now include people who suffer from mental illness. It should be noted that to "improve conditions" is not equivalent to saying that the participants achieved "health efficiency" (Bremberg, 2016; Leigh, 1983). Half of the participants who had taken the Life-knowledge and Creative courses had remained enrolled at the Folk High School on different courses, and among the other half of the group, we note that only a few had entered into gainful employment, and even then, only on a part-time basis. Regarding the participants who are currently enrolled in the Life-knowledge and Creative courses, their future prospects remain somewhat vague, despite the apparent liberating process that they had experienced. In those cases where specific plans for the future were articulated, it was not uncommon for these plans to be linked to continued studies at the Folk High School. In other words, there is a risk of institutionalization even in this context (Hugo & Hedegaard, 2021). This can be understood in the sense that the liberating process primarily impacts the participants' self-stigma positively as long as this takes place in environments where the participants have experience of not being exposed to social stigma (Goffman, 1963; Link, 1987; Wikman, 2017), either at home or at the Folk High School. Thus, the empowerment process becomes isolated in this regard (Archibald & Wilson, 2011) and as a result of the structure of the present study, characterized by short-termism. The participants do not entertain future life plans that extend beyond the context of the Folk High School, but when examined in the light of their situation before they had enrolled at the Folk High School, the liberating process is still noticeable.

The educational programs that the participants were enrolled in primarily focused on self-stigma. Fortunately, this self-stigma was

subject to change for the participants. The social stigma that exists outside the safe environment of the Folk High School (or the home) is more difficult to influence; but with reduced self-stigma, it is increasingly possible that the participants will not be similarly negatively influenced by social stigma as they were in the past. In other words, it seems that the first step in the process of empowerment with its associated components of power, control, and self-reliance (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 2000) is concentrated on the present. Furthermore, it is primarily the direct health effects (in combination with new ways of thinking about oneself) that the educational courses have achieved thus far. Regarding the indirect health effects (Bremberg, 2016; Leigh, 1983), the Life-knowledge and Creative courses at the Folk High School which are aimed at people with mental illness hardly contribute to access to improved working conditions or a higher social status in the near future. Instead, we note that a liberating process of empowerment only begins in the educational courses, where resources for dealing with daily life and looking after themselves are made accessible to participants. Exactly how this liberating process of empowerment develops in the future is difficult to predict, but it is quite clear that the participants received several new tools that they can use to maintain power, control, and self-reliance, and thereby resist self-stigma.

Conclusion and future research

This article has focused on the Swedish Folk High School system and its role in how adults with long-term mental illnesses can recover and achieve increased participation in society and social life. Our study concludes that the Folk High School environment and the educational courses can contribute to an increased sense of well-being in the present. The participants described that, in the safe and meaningful social context which the Folk High School environment instantiates, their self-awareness was strengthened and that they had more trust in their abilities, experienced reduced levels of self-stigma, and entertained hope for a better future. The participants reported that a liberating process of change had begun in their lives which entailed "remembering how it is to be human" after years of being isolated from meaningful social contexts. The liberating process of change made resources available to the participants that allowed them to function more effectively in their everyday lives. The process had also increased the participants' sense of

empowerment so that in the future, they could practise power, control, and self-reliance in multiple contexts that extend beyond the home and the Folk High School environment. Future research in this area should thus shed light on the next step in the process of change and liberation described in this article. Such research would examine what educational programs and support structures can support the rehabilitation/habilitation of individuals so that they can enjoy a functional work-life and/or continue their studies outside the Folk High School, where the components of empowerment and resistance to self-stigma are exposed to different challenges. In this respect, a longitudinal study that follows educational programs aimed at individuals who lack resources and whose health has already suffered because of this, but also the subsequent transition to work, would be particularly interesting.

References

Andersén, A. (2011). *Ett särskilt perspektiv på högre studie? Folkhögskoledeltagares sociala representationer om högskola och universitet.* Jönköping: Jönköping University.

Anthony, W.A. & Unger, K.V. (1991). Supported education: An additional program resource for young adults with long term mental illness. *Community Mental Health Journal, 27*(2), 145–156.

Antonovsky, A. (1987). *Unraveling the mystery of health: How people manage stress and stay well.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Archibald, T. & Wilson, A.L. (2011). *Rethinking empowerment: Theories of power and the potential for emancipatory praxis.* Adult Education Research Conference.

Bazos, A. & Hausman, J. (2004). *Correctional education as a crime control program.* Los Angeles: UCLA School of Public Policy and Social Research.

Bengtsson, J. (2005). En livsvärldsansats för pedagogisk forskning. In J. Bengtsson (Ed.), *Med livsvärlden som grund. Bidrag till utvecklandet av en livsvärldsfenomenologisk ansats i pedagogisk forskning* (9–58). Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Bjursell, C. & Nordvall, H. (2016). *Folkbildningens frihet och värde: Metaperspektiv på folkhögskolor och studieförbund.* Stockholm: Folkbildningsrådet.

Bjursell, C. (2019). Growth through education: The narratives of older adults. *Frontiers in Sociology, 4*(11).

Bloom, D.E., Cafiero, E.T., Jané-Llopis, E., Abrahams-Gessel, S., Bloom, L.R., Fathima, S., Feigl, A.B., Gaziano, T., Mowafi, M., Pandya, A., Prettner, K.,

Rosenberg, L., Seligman, B., Stein, A., & Weinstein, C. (2011). *The global economic burden of non-communicable diseases.* Geneva: World Economic Forum.

Bremberg, S. (2016). Att minska ojämlikhet i hälsa – några dilemman. *Nordisk Välfärdsforskning, 1*(1), 8–18.

Chapell, C. A. (2004). Post-secondary correctional Education and recidivism: A meta-analysis of research conducted 1990–1999. *Journal of Correctional Education, 55*(2), 148–167.

Colliander, H., Malmström, L. & Millenberg, F. (2020). Folkhögskolans pedagogik och didaktik. In P. Andersson, H. Colliander & E-M. Harlin (Red.), *Om folkhögskolan – en särskild utbildningsform för vuxna* (113–136). Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design.* London: Sage Publications.

Elo, S., & Kyngäs, H. (2008). The qualitative content analysis process. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 62*(1), 107–115.

Ferrari, S., Bressi, C., Busnelli, E., Mattei, G., Pozzoli, S., Oliva, A., Galeazzi, G.M. & Pingani, L. (2020). Stigma on mental health among high school students: Validation of the Italian version of the attribution questionnaire-27 (AQ-27-I) in a high school student population. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 17*(14):5207.

Folkbildningsrådet. (2018). *Folkhögskolans förstärkningsbidrag – En fördjupad analys 2017*. Stockholm: Folkbildningsrådet.

Folkhälsomyndigheten. (2021). *Folkhälsans utveckling. Årsrapport 2021.* Stockholm: Folkhälsomyndigheten.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* New York: Continuum.

Freire, P. (1978). *Pedagogy in process: The letters to Guinea-Bissau*. New York: Continuum.

Fuchs, V. R. (1979). The economics of health in post-industrial society. *Public Interest 14*, 3–20.

Geertz, C. (1983). *Local knowledge - Further essays in interpretive anthropology.* US: Basic Books.

Geertz, C. (1993). *The interpretation of cultures.* London: Fontana Press.

Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Gordon, H. & Weldon, B. (2003). The impact of career and technical education programs on adult offenders: Learning behind bars. *Journal of Correctional Education, 54*(4), 200–208.

Graneheim, U. H., & Lundman, B. (2004). Qualitative content analysis in nursing research: Concepts, procedures, and measures to achieve trustworthiness. *Nurse Education Today, 24*(2), 105–112.

Halkier, B. (2010). *Fokusgrupper*. Stockholm: Liber.

Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in practice* (3rd ed.). London & New York: Routledge.

Heaney, T. (1995). *Issues in Freirean pedagogy.* Chicago: National-Louis University.

Hedegaard, J. & Hugo, M. (2017). Social dimensions of learning: The experience of young adult students with Asperger syndrome at a supported IT education. Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research, 19(3), 256–268.

Hedegaard, J., Hugo, M. (2020). Inclusion through Folk High School courses for senior citizens. *Educational Gerontology, 46*(2), 84–94.

Hedegaard J., Hugo, M. & Bjursell, C. (2021). Folk High School as a supportive environment for participants with high-functioning autism. *Studies in Adult Education and Learning,* 2021, 1–18.

Hugo, M. (2013). *Meningsfullt lärande i skolverksamheten på särskilda ungdomshem.* Institutionsvård i fokus, Forskningsrapport nr1:2013, Stockholm: Statens institutionsstyrelse.

Hugo, M. & Hedegaard, J. (2017). Education as habilitation: Empirical examples from an adjusted education in Sweden for students with high-functioning autism. *Andragogic Perspectives, 23*(3), 71–87.

Hugo, M. & Hedegaard, J. (2021). Inclusion through folk high school in Sweden: The experience of young adult students with high-functioning autism. *Disability and Rehabilitation, 43*(19), 2805–2814.

Jorgenson, D. W. (1967). The theory of investment behavior in R. Ferber (ed.), *Determinants of Investment Behavior* (129–175). New York: NBER.

Kindblom, L. (2016). *Invandring och svenskundervisning - så började det.* Stockholm: Leif Kindblom förlag.

Krippendorff, K. (2004). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology.* London: Sage.

Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *Den kvalitativa forskningsintervjun.* Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Lantz, A. (1993). *Intervjumetodik.* Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Larsen, A-K. (2009). *Metod helt enkelt.* Malmö: Gleerups.

Lean, M., Fornells-Ambrojo, M., Milton, A., Lloyd-Evans, B., Harrison-Stewart, B., Yesufu-Udechuku, A., Kendall, T. & Johnson, S. (2019). Self-management interventions for people with severe mental illness: Systematic review and meta-analysis. *The British Journal of Psychiatry, 214,* 260–268.

Leigh, P. J. (1983). Direct and indirect effects of education on health. *Social Science & Medicine, 17*(4), 227–234.

Link, B. G. (1987). Understanding labeling effects in the area of mental disorders: An assessment of the effects of expectations of rejection. *American Sociological Review, 52,* 96–112.

Mackenbach, J. P., Kulhanova, I., Artnik, B., Bopp, M., Borrell, C., Clemens, T., de Gelder, R. (2016). *Changes in mortality inequalities over two decades: Register based study of European countries.* BMJ, 353, i1732.

Nylander, E., Bernhard, D., Rahm, L. & Andersson, P. (2015). *oLika TillSAMmanS: En kartläggning av folkhögskolors lärmiljöer för deltagare med funktionsnedsättning.* Linköping: Linköping University Press.

OECD & European Commission (2020). *Health at a glance: Europe 2020: State of health in the EU cycle.* Paris: OECD Publishing.

Paldanius, S. (2007). *En folkhögskolemässig anda i förändring: En studie av folkhögskoleanda och mässighet i folkhögskolans praktik.* Linköping: Linköpings Universitet.

Potash, J., Ho, R. & Ho, A. (2018). Citizenship, compassion, the arts: People living with mental illness need a caring community. *Social Change, 48*(2) 238–259.

Rappaport, J. (1987). Terms of empowerment/exemplars of prevention: Toward a theory for community psychology. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 15*(2), 121–148.

Riemer, M., Reich, S.M., Evans, S.D., Nelson, G. & Prilleltensky, I. (2020). *Community psychology - In pursuit of liberation and wellbeing.* London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Rosenberg, M.B. (2015). *Nonviolent communication.* Encinitas: Puddle Dancer Press.

Runesdotter, C. (2010). *I otakt med tiden? Folkhögskolorna i ett föränderligt fält.* Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis.

Schütz, A. (1944/1976). The stranger: An Essay in Social Psychology. In A. Schütz (ed.), *Collected Papers, Vol.II.* The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Skogman, E. (2015). *Att studera som vuxen med funktionsnedsättning. En fördjupad studie av studerandes erfarenheter.* Stockholm: Specialpedagogiska skolmyndigheten.

Socialstyrelsen, Folkhälsomyndigheten & Sveriges Kommuner och Regioner. (2020). *Begrepp inom området psykisk hälsa.* Stockholm: Socialstyrelsen, Folkhälsomyndigheten & Sveriges Kommuner och Regioner.

Spring, L., Smith, M. & DaSilva, M. (2017). The transformative-learning potential of feminist-inspired guided art gallery visits for people diagnosed with mental illness and addiction. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 37*(1), 57–72.

Statistiska Centralbyrån. (2019). *Antal deltagare i folkhögskolekurser efter kön, kurstyp, kursens studieomfattning, kursinriktning, region, där utbildningen bedrivs, åldersgrupp och år.* Stockholm: Statistiska Centralbyrån.

Sveriges Folkhögskolor. (2020). *Det här är folkhögskolan.* Retrieved from https://www.sverigesfolkhogskolor.se/om-folkhogskola/ 2020-07-17.

Tesch, R. (1990). *Qualitative research: Analysis types and software tools.* Oxford: Routledge.

The Swedish National Council of Adult Education. (2017). *Folk utanför folkbildningen – En studie om dem som inte deltar i studieförbundens verksamheter.* Stockholm: The Swedish National Council of Adult Education.

The Swedish National Council of Adult Education. (2018). *Folkbildningsrådets samlade bedömning – Folkbildningens betydelse för samhället 2018.* Stockholm: The Swedish National Council of Adult Education.

The Swedish National Council of Adult Education. (2020). *Villkorsanvisning för folkhögskolans studieomdöme.* Stockholm: The Swedish National Council of Adult Education.

Tudor, K. (1996). *Mental health promotion: Paradigms and practice.* Oxford: Routledge.

Tyerman, J., Patovirta, A-L. & Celestini, A. (2021). How stigma and discrimination influences nursing care of persons diagnosed with mental illness: A systematic review. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing, 42*(2), 153–163.

Vetenskapsrådet. (2017). *God forskningssed.* Stockholm: Vetenskapsrådet.

Vinnerljung, B., Berlin, M., & Hjern, A. (2010). *Skolbetyg, utbildning och risker för ogynnsam utveckling hos barn.* Social rapport 2010. Stockholm: Socialstyrelsen.

Waghorn, G., Still, M., Chant, D., & Whiteford, H. (2004). Specialised supported education for Australians with psychotic disorders. *Australian Journal of Social Issues, 39*(4), 443–458.

Wallerstein, N. & Bernstein, E. (1988). Empowerment education: Freire's ideas adapted to health education. *Health Education Quarterly, 15*(4), 379–94.

Wells, R. E. (2000). Education as prison reform: A meta-analysis. Unpublished dissertation. Louisiana State University. prison inmates. *Tex Medicine, 96*(6), 69–75.

Whitley, R., Shepherd, G. & Slade, M. (2019). Recovery colleges as a mental health innovation. *World Psychiatry, 18*(2), 141–142.

Wibeck, V. (2010). *Om fokuserade gruppintervjuer som undersökningsmetod.* Lund: Studentlitteratur.

World Health Organization (2008). *Closing the gap in a generation. Health equity through action on the social determinants of health.* Genéve: World Health Organization.

Wikman, S. (2017). *Diskriminering i samband med psykisk ohälsa. En kunskapsöversikt.* Stockholm: Nationell Samverkan för Psykisk Hälsa.

Zimmerman, M. A. (2000). Empowerment theory psychological, organizational and community levels of analysis. In J. Rappaport & E. Seidman (ed.), *Handbook of community psychology,* (43–63). New York: Springer-Verlag.

About the authors

Joel Hedegaard is Assistant Professor of Education and a researcher at the School of Education and Communication (HLK), at Jönköping University, Sweden. He is affiliated to Encell, the National Centre for Lifelong Learning at HLK. Joel's main research interest is in formal and informal learning environments and how they provide opportunities for inclusion for individuals and groups who are, or run the risk of, exclusion. Current research projects include Men's Shed and adult education and labour market integration initiatives for people without full grades from Primary and Upper Secondary school.

Martin Hugo is Associate Professor and a researcher at the School of Education and Communication at Jönköping University, Sweden. He is affiliated to Encell, the National Centre for Lifelong Learning at HLK. Martin's main research interest is what meaningful learning looks like for people who have previously failed in the education system. Current research projects include a study of young people with substance abuse problems and their motivation for school and treatment and adult education and labour market integration initiatives for people without full grades from Primary and Upper Secondary school.

Contact details

Joel Hedegaard

School of Education and Communication
PO Box 1026, SE-551 11 Jönköping, Sweden

Email: joel.hedegaard@ju.se

martin.hugo@ju.se