A short introduction to research on the Nordic folk high schools

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The folk high schools have been characterized as “the Nordic countries’ strongest and most independent contribution to the areas of education and adult education”1 (Furuland, 1991: 468). Thus, one could imagine that the indigenous nature of the folk high schools, should have given the folk high schools a central position in Nordic educational research. However, few cases of indepth empirical research on contemporary folk high schools have been produced. When being addressed in Nordic and international academic debate, the folk high schools are usually dealt with on a general level, often referring to their historical development or assumed democratic function in the Nordic countries (Johansson & Bergstedt, 2015; Knutas, 2013). The kind of research focus, often found to be of relevance in relation to other educational contexts – targeting for example interaction in classrooms, the professional role of the teacher, or what kind of contemporary educational ideals that characterizes the educational practice – is more or less absent in educational research journals when it comes to folk high schools. The limited existing research, examining the contemporary educational practices of folk high schools in the Nordic countries, is mostly found in monographs, reports and anthologies written in a Scandinavian context.

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– primarily Swedish – language (Gustavsson, Andersdotter & Sjöman, 2009; Paldanius, 2007, 2014; Runesdotter, 2010). Another trend within the Nordic field of folk high school research is that several significant scholars, who have made key contributions to our understanding of these institutions of popular education, such as Bernt Gustavsson, Ove Korsgaard and Staffan Larsson, quite recently retired from their academic positions.

Thus, the idea behind this special issue is twofold. First, it addresses the current need for empirical research focusing on Nordic folk high schools in contemporary society. Secondly, it intends both to encourage and present a new generation of folk high school researchers. Before introducing the contributions to this special issue, a background regarding the Nordic folk high schools is needed. Below we will give an overview of ideas that have been characterized as formative for the emergence of folk high schools in the Nordic countries.

The Nordic folk high schools are most often claimed to have originated in Denmark where the folk high school in Rødding, established in 1844, is usually identified as the first one (Gustavsson, 2010; Furuland, 1994; Johansson & Bergstedt, 2013; Skovmand, 1989:15; Korsgaard, 2000:316). The national romantic ideals of Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783–1872) where the ordinary people would be given knowledge about their history, language and cultural inheritance, are commonly seen as the source of inspiration for the Danish folk high schools. The folk high school movement grew and was successively established in Norway (1864), Sweden (1868) and Finland (1889).

Even if the orientation and modelling of the schools have differed both in time, and between the countries, some aspects remain common denominators for the Nordic folk high schools: the role as a pedagogical alternative to the public school system, the frequency of boarding schools, the informal relations between teacher and student, the high degree of voluntary participation without academic rewards, and the initial connection to rural areas. The owners of the schools are often connected to civil society, although the schools are mainly government-financed. The folk high school’s close relation to the emergence of democracy in Scandinavia has been accentuated, with its initial focus on the political schooling of the farming community as well as a later significance for the popular movements (Cf Arvidson, 1988; Furuland, 1991; Korsgaard, 2000; Gustavsson, 2010; Runesdotter, 2010; Mikkelsen, 2014).

While there are similarities between the national movements, several differences have also been pointed out. Even the idea of a common origin of the Nordic folk high schools has been questioned. In Sweden, claims have been made that the first Swedish folk high schools were established without any knowledge of the Danish movement (see Arvidson (1988) and Gustavsson (2010) for discussion of the claim). Others have emphasized the difference between the national movements without separating them entirely.

In the literature, different lines of reasoning describe the origin of the folk high school and popular education traditions in the Nordic countries. One way of portraying the origin accentuates the difference between the varying philosophic foundations between the traditions in for instance Sweden and Denmark, and their relationship to the ideals presented by the Enlightenment (Gustavsson, 2010).

Gustavsson (2010:22-23), emphasizing the different philosophical roots, sees the national romantic orientation of the Danish movement as distinct from the more pragmatic and academic orientation of the Swedish folk high schools. Gustavsson delineates a clearer Kantian influence in the Swedish tradition. Grundtvig was, Gustavsson underlines, inspired by the German phi-
Gottfried Herder who saw every nation in the form of a people with a common language and a common folk culture. Hence, Grundtvigian ideas could be seen as part of a national romantic tradition which was a critical reaction against the French Enlightenment’s universalism. Fain (1971), makes a similar remark, when tracing the nationalist origin of the Grundtvigian folk high schools, and pointing out its “emphasis on blood and folk, on language and myth, on natural bonds, and on many of the other elements associated with the anti-Enlightenment German heritage” (Fain, 1971:89).

The Swedish folk high schools, Gustavsson (2010) argues, did not lean on this nationalist romantic ideology. Instead, it was more inspired by the Enlightenment, especially as conceived by Kant. The Kantian philosopher Hans Larsson played a similar role as source of inspiration for the Swedish folk high schools, as Grundtvig did for the Danish ones (Gustavsson, 2010).

While analysing the various meaning of the word “folk” and its implications for traditions of popular education (folkbildning and folkeopplysning) in the Scandinavian countries Korsgaard makes a similar observation regarding different emphases on the ethno-national dimension: “The Swedish folkbildning tradition has laid a special emphasis on the social and democratic perspective, while the Danish and Norwegian folkeopplysning tradition – for certain periods – has placed a major emphasis on the national-cultural perspective.” (Korsgaard, 2002:11).

Another way of portraying the difference puts more emphasis on the geopolitical power relations and historical events in the region during the late 1800s. Skovmand (1983) builds his account of the relationships between Scandinavian folk high schools on historical documents, especially from summits between the national movements. He accentuates the national geopolitical conditions in Scandinavia in the period of the primary establishment of the folk high school. Three of the four Nordic countries were at this time in an intense struggle against domination from neighboring nations. Finland’s identity was threatened as the nation was adopted as a region under the Russian Tsar. Denmark was defeated in the war against Prussia and Austria, causing the loss of Schleswig, Holstein and Sachsen-Lauenburg in 1864 (Korsgaard, 2000:316; Korsgaard & Wiborg, 2006:373-374). And lastly, Norway was in a process of breaking out of the union with Sweden (Skovmand, 1983:127-133). The establishment and development of the national folk high schools, Skovmand argues, were influenced by the political pressure that these countries were under, as was the relationship between the national folk high school movements.

The folk high schools of Norway were in their initial phase closely connected to Grundtvig and adopted his national romantic focus (Simon, 1989; Korsgaard, 2011). The founders of Sagatun, the first folk high school in Norway (1864), had personal contact with Grundtvig (Mikkelsen, 2014:68) and in their primary establishment, the Norwegian schools were in close communication with the Danish (Skovmand, 1983:22). The founders of the Norwegian schools, such as Viggo Ullman, were central in the Norwegian nationalistic movement, campaigning for the liberation from Swedish rule (Skovmand, 1983:109; Mikkelsen, 2014:126-133). Skovmand and Mikkelsen both describe how this political activity on the part of the Norwegian leaders caused a schism with the Swedish folk high school movement (Skovmand, 1983:102-120; Mikkelsen, 2014:132-133).

In Skovmand’s historical perspective, the nationalism represented by Norway, Denmark and Finland was arguably driven by the threat against their national identity. Sweden’s role as a regional power in the decades after the establishment of the folk high schools, is
presented by Skovmand as a major cause for the difference in the development of nationalism within the Swedish folk high schools.

The Norwegian folk high schools were influenced by the Christian revival movements from their establishment. Both the initial founders in the 19th century, (Mikkelsen, 2014:68–78) and a second major establishment in the beginning of the 20th century were closely connected to the church and the revival movements of the time. However, towards the end of the 1800s, a split between the “fri lynte” (liberal) Grundtvigian founders, and the later more missionary oriented “kristne ungdomsskoler” (youth high schools) had opened, and this controversy has shaped the organizational development of the Norwegian schools (Lövgren, 2015:200). The schools in Norway are still divided into two organizations based on this controversy but the differences between the two are discussed (Mikkelsen, 2014:318–321) and today they share offices and cooperate in areas such as marketing.

The development of the folk high schools in Finland followed the national division between the Finnish-speaking and the Swedish-speaking population. After the Swedish rule, public officials were predominantly Swedish speakers, while the commoners spoke Finnish (Kantasalmi & Hake, 1997:357–358; Skovmand, 1983:84–85). Around 1896, 6 schools were connected to Swedish language and culture, whereas 13 were based on a Finnish heritage (Skovmand, 1983:98). Even though the Finnish folk high schools (like the Swedish) had no strong affiliation to Grundtvig (Gustavson, 2010), their first schools had a close connection to the Danish folk high school of Askov, based on visits by the founders of the Finnish schools (Kantasalmi & Hake, 1997:362).

The development in Finland sets itself apart from the other Nordic nations as a student movement closely connected to the universities (Skovmand, 1983:88). In Sweden, too, the schools built a link to formal education, and the Swedish teachers were mostly the same academics that taught in grammar school. Simon (1989) describes how Swedish scholars, as well as the initiators of folk high schools in Sweden, had little understanding for the opposition that the Grundtvigian movements of Denmark and Norway had to the established academic context of the universities (Simon, 1989:104). The Swedish and Finnish folk high schools have maintained this trend and kept closer to the formal academic systems, whereas the schools in Norway and Denmark held back on formal examinations and degrees. Today, the Finnish have the strongest academic focus of the four national folk high schools, offering degrees from secondary education to university level (Finlands folkhögskoleförening, 2017).

If we move on from this ideological-historical background and compare some basic information about the contemporary folk high schools in the Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland, both similarities and differences can be found. Table 1 below presents an overview of the Nordic folk high schools derived from statistics presented by the national movements.

The limited space of a table forces us to present only short captions of credits and offered courses. The information in the table is mainly taken from the homepages of the four different national organizations of folk high schools (see footnotes). The editors also worked on a compilation of statistics to include a comparison of the number of students attending folk high schools in each nation. We found that such a comparison could not be condensed to the degree needed for the inclusion in this editorial. Such a presentation will have to be more substantial to relate both differences in national statistical presentations, the diversity in types of courses offered, and the varied forms of student attendance in the different national systems.
The intention of this expanded editorial is not to extensively discuss the historical development, national characteristics, and relations between the different Nordic folk high schools. We present this material as examples of the different narratives of the historical development, and some basic characteristics of the movement as background when reading the four articles in this issue. Much more could be said about the Nordic folk high schools, their developments and present status. Hopefully this issue will stimulate further contributions to our understanding of this Nordic tradition of adult education. Some important aspects, addressing its contemporary situation, are already covered in the articles of this issue.

* All four articles in this issue feature new research in the realm of Nordic popular education (folkbildning). Three of the studies are set in folk high schools, the fourth in a study circle. In the first article of this issue, Rasmus Kolby Rahbek presents a qualitative study that examines different ways in which people working at Danish folk high schools experience the concept of bildung (dannelse), and how this experience relates to the school’s pedagogical practices. As discussed above, bildung (dannelse, bildning) is a key concept in the Nordic folk high school tradition, albeit with different meanings, which previously has been explored in research from a historical perspective. Here, Kolby Rahbek makes a contribution by using a phenomenographic approach to examine the contemporary meaning of the concept in practice.

The second article, by Dörte Bernhard and Per Andersson, focuses on Swedish folk high schools participants with disabilities, and their learning environment within adult education. The constantly changing composition of participants at folk high schools, their differing backgrounds, and the development of suitable pedagogies and innovative educational models, have been pointed out as significant characteristics of the folk high schools (Larsson 2013). During the last years, the number of participants diagnosed with various disabilities have increased at folk high schools in Sweden. In this article, Bernhard and Andersson present an empiri-
cal study of this field based on data from Statistics Sweden, and on a self-designed online questionnaire with respondents drawn from the folk high schools. Both facilitating factors and developmental factors regarding the adjustment of the learning environment in relation to participants with disabilities are presented and discussed.

The pedagogical development at the folk high schools however, is not only a matter of adjustments to new participants. It could also be seen, as Eva-Marie Harlin explores in the following article, as concomitant result of the folk high school teacher’s professional development. Harlin examines how students in a folk high school teacher training program develops their professional reflexivity through video recording and viewing their own teaching sessions. The findings show that this training program contributed to the teachers’ professional development by offering them an image of themselves in the classroom, actions that were used to develop a reflexive habit and increase the students’ confidence. Thus, this process is apprehended as a tool helping students to develop their professional identity both in relation to the local context, and in connection with ideas associated with Nordic popular education.

In the last article of this issue, Annika Pastuhov and Ari Sivenius step away from the folk high school context. They examine the study circle, an educational model often seen as an egalitarian and democratic role model for popular education. Pastuhov and Sivenius presents an ethnographic case study of a Finnish study circle in philosophy, examining how democratic citizenship is expressed. The study defines citizenship as something expressed in different ways in relation to social contexts, identity positions and in relation to education and educational practices. The analysis of the study circle indicates that the openness and voluntary character of the study circle may go hand in hand with subtle forms exclusion and introversion in groups of like-minded participants.

Endnotes

1 Our translation from Swedish.
2 The call for papers to this special issue was first launched at a symposium for PhD-students in Oslo 2016, organised by Mimer – The Swedish network for research on popular education, in collaboration with the two national Norwegian folk high school associations: Folkhøgskoleforbundet (FHF) and Norges Kristelege Folkehøgskolelag (NKF).
3 Although for instance Larsson (2013) and Tengberg (1968) refer to a folk high school in Rendsburg in Holstein, founded in 1842, as the actual first one.
4 Iceland has a limited tradition of folk high schools and liberal adult education compared to the other Nordic countries (European Infonet Adult Education, 2017).
5 Højskolerne (2017) and Årsstatistik for højskolerne, (2016)
6 Finlands folkhögskoleförening (2017)
7 Folkhögskola.nu (2017) and Folkbildningsrådets årsredovisning (2015)
8 Folkehögskolene (2017)

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