ADULT PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT IN LATVIAN FOLK HIGH SCHOOLS: AN OBSERVATIONAL ANALYSIS

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Folk high school movement has been known in Latvia since 1917, when the first Folk high school was established in Valmiera. These institutions have never been real boarding schools; they provided lectures for any kind of interest to listeners mainly from rural areas approximately once a week. In this article, attention is drawn to an understanding of the study process that facilitates personal development of adult learners at the folk high school. A participant observation was carried out at one of the biggest folk high schools in Latvia in October 2011 and March-April 2012. The study took 9 days, 2-3 hours were spent in direct observation of various lessons (Latvian and English languages and floristic) each day. A conclusion drawn from the results of the study is that in situations where personal development takes place the study process is characterized by three main aspects: human as a value, human values, and higher human values at the centre of the study.

Keywords: adult learning, personal development, Latvia, folk high school

Folk High School Education in Latvia and Denmark

Like Denmark, Latvia has old traditions of Folk high schools as institutions of informal education since the 20th century, which makes this institution a key element in facilitating informal education of adults.

In the history of Latvian pedagogy, only two concepts are used when speaking of institutions of folk education: Folk high school and Folk University. The first institution is related to the lower-stage educational institutions established during the first period of Latvian statehood (Ķestere, 2009) where parish schoolmasters taught various subjects. These schools were part of the formal education system and trained pupils for the next stage of education.

In adult education, the concept of Folk universities is used specifically. The latest definition of this concept is provided by Ķestere (2009) in stating that the Folk University is ‘a democratic institution of adult education established outside the framework of the formal education system that facilitates hobby education, lifelong learning, and professional development.’
The vocabulary of pedagogical terms (Pedagoģijas termīnu skaidrojošā vārdnīca, 2000) provides a similar definition of the Folk university describing it as ‘an institution of higher education established outside the framework of the formal education system on a voluntary basis where studies are normally designed for adults and the content of studies is determined by interests of residents.’

The origins of traditions of folk high school education date back to Denmark in the 19th century when N. F. S. Grundtvig, observing a decline in his nation, decided to act and establish centres of informal education in order to raise the overall level of national education and national awareness (Rordam, 1965; Andresen, 1981).

An analysis of the theories of Danish folk high schools shows the necessity to identify two principal aspects – personal development and socialisation (the skill of living together). It also helps understand the essence of personal development: studying for oneself, in accordance with one’s needs and interests, as well as a very important aspect – learning democratic values, such as tolerance, respect, shared responsibility, affection, openness to diversity, etc.

A similar movement was observed in Latvia in early 20th century, during the first period of Latvian statehood (1918-1940) when it was decided, upon the initiative of the Latvian Youth Association, to establish Folk Universities in order to provide everyone, especially people who were unable to acquire education at day schools due to work or other circumstances, with the possibility to study. These institutions too were informal (out-of-school institutions at that time) like those established in Denmark, but had its roots in England and American Open Universities traditions (Akmentiņš, 1926).

It is interesting to note that similar tendencies in personal development, stemming from Denmark, can be observed in Latvia from 1919 till 1940. In Latvia, an emphasis can be placed on Folk Universities which were more oriented towards personal development as a way of acquiring education according to one’s wishes and interests. In the meantime, Folk Universities in the countryside, for example, the famous Folk University of Murmuiža, were focussed specifically on the mental development of people (Sokolova, 2000); lectures addressing moral issues were often given there, anti-alcohol campaigns were organised, and many things more.

This is witnessed by the following lines from the text of the Murmuiža Folk University hymn:

‘To understand the mighty sun
You must have it inside your heart…
Your warm heart will be like a sun
Its holy power shining over you…’

(an excerpt from ‘Sun Songs’ by the Latvian poet Fricis Bārda)

It was the warmth of the heart, the homey and family-like atmosphere that often left an indelible impression on anyone who had the happiness of visiting this institution. The process of reintroducing folk high schools started in Latvia in 1991. It must be acknowledged that these schools tried to adopt specifically the Danish model and to establish centres of democracy in Latvia.
What is Personality?

'Man is the measure of all things' (Protagoras) and 'Know thyself' (Socrates) – these are the words contained in maxims that started the way of development of man as personality in Ancient Greece. The way of man's awareness of himself as a free and unique personality starts here, independently of his place, role in the society and the will of Gods or Fate (Cohn, 1978). The principal basis of a personality is specifically a developed subjectivity, uniqueness and freedom of man (Keckalo, 2006).

Without doubt, man lives and develops in a specific society, in interaction with other humans. A personality certainly possesses a nucleus of action and struggle against unwanted influence. Goodness in one's behaviour and the ability to distinguish between the good and the bad facilitates the improvement and development of man as a personality.

Dostoevsky inveighed against the impunity of a personality, use of freedom at the cost of the freedom of everybody else. Personality was grounded in a moral lifestyle. And, according to his thoughts, freedom was viewed as a personal and moral freedom, the comprehension of which was borrowed from the Christian religion.

The freedom of a personality is recognised as one of its principal characteristics. Freedom is respect towards the personality of any person, towards the right of man to be who he is, towards his individual traits. Besides, the author believes that freedom automatically means the sense of responsibility in man.

Dobrenkov and Kravcenko (2005) comes to the conclusion that man must be viewed as an individual and a personality. An individual is merely a part of the mankind, whereas a personality is viewed as man of free will and ability to express and secure his unique 'Self'. Averin (1999) adds that the understanding of a personality is closely related to the position occupied in the society concerned.

In psychology, the question of personality is focused on trying to understand which factors determine man's behaviour to a greater degree: the biological or the social ones. It deals with the question of whether man is guided by instincts, unconsciousness, reason or by some other internal force.

In the general overview of modern personality theories, personality is seen in psychology as a unity of a nucleus and periphery (Maddi, 2002) where the nucleus is respectively described as innate, firm traits of a personality. And where periphery, in its turn, characterises the traits acquired by a personality in the process of socialization. Some authors (e.g. Rubinstein) note that some traits may move over from periphery to the nucleus over time and become firm.

The nucleus is understood to mean tendencies, for example, an attempt to actualize one's inner potential, whereas periphery shows specific models of behaviour, the specific qualities of a personality, his achievement motivation (Maddi, 2002).

Mind helps man overcome lower instincts and acquire self-confidence. In his opinion, man opposes himself against Nature by virtue of the activity of his mind and breaks loose of it. Thus man obtains freedom, and responsibility with it, too, since now all life is in the hands of man himself.

Therefore, as Averin (1999) notes, a personality is of a dialectic nature, in the process of its formation a personality is always situated between two opposing forces determined by the factors of heredity and social environment.

Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, two scientists representing the humanistic approach (which is one of the principal approaches employed in
the context of folk high schools), placed stress in the actualization theory specifically on the (biological, hereditary) nucleus of personality as the principal characteristic trait. In this theory, man is good, he possesses good characteristic traits, such as acceptance of others, admiration of others, positive attitude, by nature. In fact, Rogers and Maslow describes actualized men in quite a similar way; Rogers attributes to them qualities such as love towards oneself and others, openness, whereas Maslow puts stress on unegoistic love and understanding of others. Maslow holds that better self-
actualization takes place in an environment that is full of respect and love.

Although close to Freud's idea of man guided by biological factors (instincts), this attitude was different in that Freud regarded man as a quite egoistic being led by the spirit of survival and competition.

The latest theories of andragogy view personality as a unified entirety without marking off the genetic and the social nuclei. Jarvis (2005) views personality as a unity of the body (genetic, physical, and biological aspects) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, convictions, and sensations) or also as an aggregate of bodily, emotional, emotional, and cognitive elements. Illeris (2007), in turn, believes that a personality is characterised in its entirety by a unity of cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions.

The Basis for Understanding Personal Formation

Today, as education increasingly gets directed towards man himself, the processes of learning and personal development are merging to an ever greater extent (Illeris, 2004). It is stresses increasingly that development takes place already during learning rather than after it.

Three approaches are traditionally used in viewing the relationship between the nature of learning and development (Aismontas, 2006).

The first approach assumes that there is no connection between the processes of development and learning, that man's development takes place independently of the external conditions of the environment which only have to adapt themselves to the processes of natural development (Piaget).

The second approach assumes that learning and development are viewed as the same processes. This means that while man learns he also develops. (James, Watson).

According to the third approach, there exists a direct link between the processes of learning and development. In this approach, learning directs development, and development can support learning, in a way.

The processes of learning must get more and more complicated over time, guiding man's development. This means that the nearest development zone of man will be increasing continuously.

It must be noted, however, that both these approaches and the subsequent discourse where more stress is placed on authors working in the direction of andragogy, assumed for a long time that personal development meant specifically development of the cognitive sphere. Man with a high-level intellectual capacity and skills were regarded as a highly developed person. It is only with the approach of the 21st century that a direction is increasingly developed in andragogy where personal development is viewed holistically as transformation of the physical, intellectual, and emotional spheres.

Perhaps Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers are the best known authors among those who worked in the direction of personal development in the periphery of the sciences of pedagogy and psychology. Maslow (1968)
proposed a scheme with man in its centre fighting between two poles – security and growth. In his view, growth took place in small steps as soon as a person got aware of the security of his or her development. Maslow believed that man possessed a certain kind of force and that development took place during the manifestation of this force.

Rogers thought that a developed personality was the so-called 'fully functional man', whereas for Maslow it was a self-realised personality, a person who had fully realised his or her abilities, capacities, and talents. It is interesting to note that Maslow uses two concepts in this context: actualization and self-actualization; he understands the first to mean the actualization of biological traits, while self-actualization is taken to mean the traits determined by the specific social environment.

Interestingly, Maslow and Rogers places stress directly on the nucleus of personality as the principal source of personal development. Thus it will become clear later on why the teacher only has the role of a facilitator in this model rather than the role of a director, as it is according to the cultural and historical theory of Vygotsky.

Closer to the present day, there is an interesting study in the field of andragogy by Merriam and Heuer (1996) who developed specific recommendations to promote personal development. The first step in the development is reflection where some aspects of self/identity, personal history are challenged by the new experience/occurrence. Thus, when positioning adult teachers, it is important to challenge the audience to interpret their experience in an alternative way and to present ideas so as to cause a critical revaluation of their attitudes, skills, and knowledge in them.

The next step to take is to reduce the anxiety and fear related to development by securing a safe environment for the changes to happen. The guiding force of development is the security of participants about the lack of negative consequences afterwards. Personal development is not possible if there is a lack of openness due to fear, thus there is no interaction (with another environment or a man in question). The stress is placed on the creation of a psychologically secure and comfortable environment or a beneficial climate for the process of adult teaching.

The third important peculiarity is that adult teachers may work in two directions at the same time: both modelling the development process by taking it where we would like to direct our listeners to and by directing them in the course of the process itself. By modelling the process, we can share the challenges and hardships on the way of development with our students, we can convince, challenge them, help them see the individual importance in what is happening. An adult learner is both encouraged and challenged by the teacher. By extending support, the mentor demonstrates the value of the former experience of the student and creates a secure environment for development. The goal of challenging is to open up/expand the gap between the student and the environment for some time, thus creating tension in the student and the desire to close/fill in the gap. In order to create such a situation, a teacher may offer his students conflicting ideas, ask a rhetorical question or even refuse to answer their questions.

In modern theories of andragogy (Jarvis, 2005; Illeris, 2004, 2007), merging of the understanding of the processes of learning and development is taking place. Personal development is taking place holistically, in an interaction of emotional, physical, and cognitive processes, as a result of which man transforms his social experience. Personal development takes place in the process of learning, through participation in situations which help acquire and transform that part of experience which extends beyond cognitive boundaries.
Methodology

This article contains a presentation of a part of a field study which took place in October 2011 and March-April 2012 and involved an analysis of documents, direct observation of classroom activities, and interviews of students and teachers. The study was carried out at a folk high school in Latvia. The study question that determined the procedures of data collection and analysis was: ‘What aspects do describe the study process at a folk high school the best?’

A thematic analysis of observation protocols is currently provided which helped determine three most important aspects of the study process. A thematic analysis was performed within the framework of the humanistic approach, based on studies of folk high schools in theory and practice. The duration of the observation activity was 9 days, spending 2-3 hours at the school, a total of 28 hours. Observations included subjects such as Latvian (beginners’, medium, and upper level studies), English (beginners’ level), and floristic.

The primary data encoding took place in a free context without laying down the boundaries of concepts. It revealed dominant concepts such as ‘experience’, ‘life experience’, ‘teacher as a facilitator’ etc. This phase of analysis did not yield the results required – the special relationship present at the folk high school was not revealed. As a result of this the text in the next phase was encoded using the principles of the humanistic approach and implicitly this time – by looking for a hidden meaning of the process. This analysis yielded the required results, and three aspects were found which showed some specific features of the study process at this school: orientation towards the human as a value, human values (identifying values for adults), and the domination of higher human values in the process of study and mutual interaction.

Aspects of the Learning Process at Latvian Folk High Schools

An analysis of the learning process on the primary level showed that it corresponded to any other learning process for work with adults. Subjects such as learning from one’s experience, adult life experience as a learning resource, concentration on problem solving, teacher as a facilitator etc. came to the fore.

The learning process at folk high schools is therefore based on the known regularities of the adult learning process (postulated by Knowles, 1998). This process, in turn, has peculiarities of its own that make it special and support the idea of folk education and of a nation as a value, brought forward by the ideas of the founders of folk high schools in both Latvia and Denmark.

In analysing the existing observation data and reflecting within the scope of folk high school theories, three main aspects of the learning process at folk high schools were identified:
Aspects of the Learning Process at Latvian Folk High Schools

The first aspect – Man/personality as a value – describes how a teacher and a student perceive each other as equivalent partners. At this school, students are not afraid to voice their emotions and reflections, and may even object to what a teacher has said if their life experience differs from that of the teacher. For example, a girl student attending a class said she had found information on the internet that differed from what the teacher had told to the class; the teacher replied to this by saying that it was interesting to hear about that and that they could make use of it. Moreover, the personal experience of any person attending the school is treated as valuable – a pupil will get praised for his or her success in life and at home and will be skilfully used as a training resource. Teachers often praise their students by saying ‘Very good’, ‘There’s a good lad/girl!’, ‘Well done!’, ‘You’re very skilful at what you’re doing’, ‘You will succeed’ etc. Besides, teachers try to attract students’ attention and ask questions about things that students are good at.

The second aspect – Man/personality interests and needs (one may also refer to this aspect as Human Values) – means that the teacher often concentrates the learning process towards what is of interest and importance to the student. Students often get asked questions like ‘Do you like it?’, ‘What’s your fancy?’, ‘Do you like working in the garden, too?’ etc. Such questions open up the students for a free exchange of thoughts and provide them with an opportunity to use language to tell about their experience, for example, a woman told how she helped her granddaughter do her homework for school. People often talk of their work, about issues that they were worried about in the past or care about now. Besides, this school is different in that the students freely tell about their physical or psychic likes or dislikes; they freely point it out that the learning tempo is too quick, that they feel cold, are tired or wish to talk of other things.

The third aspect – Higher Human Values – means concentrating activity and communication towards values such as ‘goodness’, ‘beauty’, ‘virtue’ etc. This aspect is hard to isolate in a study; it is more likely to appear

Source: own researches
implicitly through the humane and good relationship between the teacher and the student. For example, when a teacher asks the class to think whether a person in a picture behaves well or bad, whether the person is doing his or her job well, asks the class if they would act similarly, if there is a way that the class can help the person etc. Compared to the experience acquired in Denmark where entire lectures are read on these subjects, this aspect is not so pronounced here but one may identify this aspect here as well.

Discussion

The data of the study show that, similarly to Jarvis (2005) placing the existential learning model in a learning theory based on experience, the aspects of the learning process at folk high schools cannot exist apart from the principal elements characteristic of this type of education: learning from one’s experience, problem solving, teacher as a facilitator etc.

The understanding of a personality at the folk high school is expanding and is taking in the philosophical understanding of the phenomenon, seeing a personality as a value. As noted earlier, the principal attribute of a personality is its uniqueness based on freedom. A true personality is always free. The existence of a free environment is being observed at folk high schools in Latvia in this connection, where anyone can express himself or herself in the way he or she wants. A personality is truly regarded here as a value, stressing the best traits of it and using them as the basis for the process of learning.

The formation of an adult personality may be understood in modern conceptions as learning from a holistic aspect. In the context of folk high schools, it shows itself best in the context of the humanistic approach – as the development of one’s potential, abilities, talents in the learning process and becoming a better self.

The results of the observation confirm the assumption made by Merriam and Heuer (1996) that personal development takes place in a secure and supportive environment as well as the importance of providing adults with an opportunity to reflect on their experience by asking various stimulating questions about themselves and their daily lives.

The data of the study add to what has been previously discovered in the context of personal development, marking three new aspects showing experience turning from a resource into a value, that a personality is not only free but it is also learning to feel itself as a value, with accents of democratic values appearing in these schools.

Conclusions

A personality as a holistic formation is viewed within the dimensions of body, mind, and emotions as a unified whole. The uniqueness and the necessity to manifest its freedom are undoubtedly attributes of the personality; these enable man to acquire an experience that is meaningful to him. These possibilities are well reflected in the folk high school learning process, with stress on the freedom of each man and the possibility to share one’s experience.

The formation of a psychologically safe, humane, yet stimulating environment, possibilities for reflecting as well as the modelling of learning processes in a joint activity of teachers and students may be noted as important factors of development.
A tendency is being observed at Latvian folk high schools to accentuate the value of a personality, to stress the positive moments in each listener, and to underline his or her success in the learning process and in daily life. Human values are becoming another important component of the learning process, with stress in the learning process on what alarms adults the most in daily situations and where they will be likely to succeed. The third important aspect is stressing the higher humane or democratic values in both establishing a contact with listeners and making these values part of the curriculum, which is one of the main tasks of folk high schools.

Personal formation at Latvian folk high schools shows a possibility to turn not only to mastering a subject of the curriculum but also the possibility to address the issue of human development in the learning process by creating a humane learning environment based on democratic values.

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