

## Research articles

# From nation building to global citizenship: human rights education in the Nordic folk high schools

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## Abstract

Citizenship education played a crucial role in the 19th century transition from royal sovereignty to democracy in the Nordic region, with folk high schools (FHS) playing an important role. While established to empower the people (*folk*) for active participation in society, the contemporary folk high schools have reoriented from their initial national focus to emphasise global citizenship education. The paper traces this development and asks how the identity and practice of the FHS reflect the ideals of human rights education. The article outlines the ideology and history of the Nordic folk high schools and builds an analytical framework for two empirical studies of student texts. The final discussion applies the presented material to shed light on the research question and concludes by suggesting that the Nordic folk high schools can be seen as a regional adaption of human rights education.

## Keywords

Nordic adult education, folk high schools, global citizenship education, human rights education

## **Introduction**

The Nordic folk high schools (FHS) evolved as an answer to the 19th century challenge of establishing a representative democracy in the Nordic countries (Korsgaard, 2000; Lövgren, 2017). The FHS became a cornerstone in an educational strategy where *the people (folk)* changed from being subjects to becoming citizens in a democratic state (Straume, 2013; Korsgaard, 2011). The educational model of the FHS was designed to enable the common people to take their place in these evolving democracies. These educational institutions represented ‘... a philosophy of education emphasising self-determination, self-activation and freedom’ (Korsgaard, 2011, p.14).

In the 175 years since the establishment of the Nordic FHS, the challenges facing democracy have changed (Lysgaard, 2020). The establishment of the United Nations (1945), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the process leading up to the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (2011) reflect the increasing need for a global human rights education. From the Nordic FHS's initial challenge of upholding national democracy, citizenship education must now face issues such as international human rights (Osler, 2018) and human-induced climate change (IPCC, 2021).

This paper connects research on the Nordic FHS with the growing field of human rights education (HRE) research to explore the role of the Nordic FHS in facing contemporary global challenges. The research question of the paper is: How do the identity and practices of the Nordic folk high schools reflect the ideals of human rights education?

The first part of this article builds a framework for answering this question by first presenting an historical and ideological overview of the Nordic FHS. By outlining a few examples of HRE-oriented projects in contemporary FHS, the historical perspectives are connected to practice. To further develop the analytical framework of the article, theoretical concepts from central HRE research are presented. This is followed by a development of Etienne Wenger's social learning theory (Wenger, 1998; DePalma, 2009; Lövgren, 2019).

The second part of the article presents material from two connected studies; a 12-month field study performed in 2014-2015 (Lövgren, 2017) and a supplementary empirical study conducted in 2021. In the final discussion, material from the introductory overview and the two empirical studies are connected to analyse how the identity and practice of the Nordic FHS reflect the ideals of HRE.

## **The Nordic folk high schools**

The Nordic FHS have their roots in 19th century popular Scandinavian movements. The Danish philosopher, politician and theologian N.F.S. Grundtvig initiated the FHS with the vision of a

school where the pedagogy would not be 'book learning' but rather one where students would attain a 'fitness for life' (Grundtvig, 2011). In contrast to the elitist 19th century Latin-based educational system of Denmark, Grundtvig painted a vision of the FHS as a 'school for life' (Westerman, 2009, p. 541). The FHS were the cornerstone in Grundtvig's educational strategy for the whole 'folk', from peasants to factory workers, to gain the personal development and knowledge needed to become active citizens in the evolving Nordic democratic model (Straume, 2013, p. 41; Bagley & Rust, 2009). Grundtvig's writings are continually translated (Broadridge, Jonas & Warren, 2011) and the enduring relevance of his pedagogical philosophy can be seen in the fact that the EU Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme was named after him (EU, 2022).

The central principle in Grundtvig's pedagogical philosophy is captured in the concept of 'living interaction' (Korsgaard, 2011, p. 35; Knutas & Solhaug, 2010). This term has a twofold meaning, indicating firstly a pedagogical ideal where the teacher should aim not at lecturing, but at creating a dialogue where the students and teacher learn together (Korsgaard, 2002; Weiss, 2017). These dialogues, or 'conversations in pursuit of the truth', were to be the predominant activity of the FHS. Korsgaard comments: 'Placing conversation at the heart of the matter entails the rejection of institutions such as the church or the state, or even a book such as the Bible, as the guarantor of truth.' (Korsgaard, 2011, p. 17).

Grundtvig's second use of the term 'living interaction' connects to his interpretation of enlightenment. Grundtvig defended the view that true enlightenment can never only aim at developing students' understandings of themselves but must always have an outward focus as well. Living interaction, then, comes to describe the way learners relate to fellow students as equals, as well as their active involvement in political issues concerning the common rights of all people in the nation, and in the world (Korsgaard, 2000).

If Grundtvig formulated the pedagogical ideals that were central to the emergence of the folk high school movement, it was Kristen Kold (1816-1870) who put these ideals into practice (Skovmand, 1983, p. 19). During his lifetime he was involved in the establishment of more than one hundred Danish schools (Korsgaard 2011, p. 33). The folk high schools established by Kold were close-knit communities where teachers and students shared not only classes and studies but also meals and living quarters. The focus on building a close community with everyday relations between staff and students is described as a common trait throughout the history of the Nordic FHS (Lövgren & Nordvall, 2017).

FHS built on Grundtvig's ideas were established in all Nordic countries during the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. In 1953, there were 56 FHS in Denmark, 78 in Norway, 77 in Sweden and 87 in Finland. The influence that the FHS had on

the Nordic democracies can be seen in surveys that map the educational background of parliamentary politicians in the Nordic region. In 1967, a study was conducted of the educational background of members of parliament in the Scandinavian countries (Helldén, 1968). The percentage of MPs having their main education from the FHS was as high as 20% in the Danish parliament (37 out of 179), 17% in the Norwegian parliament (26 out of 150) and 19% in the Swedish parliament (74 out of 382).

Today, there are over 400 FHS in the Nordic region. Though the schools have a common pedagogical identity, there are major differences in national legal frameworks, as well as the role the schools are given in national educational systems (Lövgren & Nordvall, 2017). The FHS development towards a global citizenship education is described in a report from the Nordic Folk High School Council (Landström, 2008). In the report, human rights and global citizenship education are defined as constitutive parts of the pedagogical identity of the FHS and a central element in the future identity and practice of the schools.

The pedagogical model represented by the Nordic FHS has had an impact beyond the Nordic region (Holm, 2019; Nordvall & Åberg, 2011). A Danish survey registers 695 regional adaptations of Grundtvigian pedagogy in European countries such as Holland, Germany, Hungary and Poland, as well as in North America, South America, Asia and Africa (Bugge, 2013).

An example of the international impact of Grundtvigian pedagogy is the Highlander Folk School, started by Miles Horton after his visit to Denmark and the Danish FHS in 1931 (Holm, 2019-224). Westermann (2005) describes the impact of Highlander as follows:

...it was in the education and training of activists for integration wherein Highlander came to national prominence, as the cradle of the Civil Rights movement. Rosa Parks, John Lewis and Martin Luther King, Jr. were among the most prominent of hundreds of Civil Rights activists who received training at Highlander. (p. 546)

### **Global citizenship education in contemporary FHS**

The research behind this paper includes a study of documents describing HR-related projects in the Nordic FHS. These documents were found in dialogue with national FHS organisations and retrieved from national websites and the homepages of local schools. The findings from the document study are exemplified here by two current national projects and four local initiatives to show the different categories found in the material.

*Peoples Future Lab*, initiated in 2021 by FFD (The Association of Folk High Schools in Denmark), is a cooperative project involving eleven Danish FHS and eleven schools that represent global FHS. In this programme, two teachers from each of the participating schools take part in a dialogue-based training programme. The schools work in pairs to develop, perform, analyse

and revise an intervention for sustainable development in their local community. After the project, the plan is for the intervention to continue, and to be led by the students at the local schools (Association of Folk High Schools in Denmark, n.d.).

In Sweden, national FHS organisations cooperate with a Swedish national HR organisation in dialogue-based courses. The aim of this cooperation is to use experiences from the FHS to further develop HRE as a means for meeting challenges (Ordfront, 2021).

Bajaj and Wahl (2016, pp. 154-156) define two ways in which HRE can be present in an educational institution. The first is a whole school approach, where HRE is infused into the school's operations. In the FHS, this could be exemplified by Sund folkehøgskole (2022) in Norway or Röda Korsets folkhögskola (2022) in Sweden. Both schools are founded on the values of HR; in their online presentations they describe HRE as fundamental for all school activities.

The second way in which Bajaj and Wahl identify the presence of HR in an educational institution (2016, pp.156-158) is that of integrated school-based programmes run by external organisations. The document study shows this is a frequent form of HRE in the Nordic FHS. Fana folkehøgskule (2021) in Norway is one of several FHS with a close connection to the United Nations Association (UNA) in the Nordic countries. UNA plays a central role in the programmes of these schools through HRE-related seminars and courses.

The Nansen Academy stands out among the Nordic FHS for its HR initiatives, nationally as well as internationally. Inge Eidsvåg, former principal of the Nansen Academy, was the founder of a programme to create dialogues between different religious and ethnic groups in Norway. The project has received both national and international attention as an example of the embedding of HR in a Nordic setting (Eidsvåg, Lindholm & Sveen, 2004).

The Nansen Academy's global commitment can be seen in the project 'Democracy, Human Rights and Peaceful Conflict Resolution'. The project established ten dialogue centres in the Balkans from 1999 to 2004 (Milas, 2005). The programme also included inviting conflicting groups from the Balkans to dialogue retreats at the Nansen Academy in Lillehammer (Bryn, Eidsvåg og Trosholmen, 2015).

## **Related research and theoretical perspectives**

### ***Contemporary FHS - a contribution to democracy?***

Historically, the FHS are seen as making a central contribution to the national development of democracy (Gustavsson, 2011; Tøsse, 2005). They have focussed on citizen education and democracy as well as designing an alternative way of learning that goes beyond that of the public school system (Dahlstedt & Nordvall, 2011, p. 245; Bagley & Rust, 2009, p. 283-284).

Furuland (1991) describes the Nordic FHS as: ‘The Nordic countries’ strongest common cultural manifestation and their most independent contribution to the fields of pedagogy and adult education.’ (p. 468, author's translation).

While the historical influence of the Nordic FHS is borne out by research, questions about the contemporary role of the FHS in Nordic society have also been raised (Nordvall & Fridolfson, 2019; Larsson, 2013; Knutas, 2013). Johansson & Bergstedt outline the historical task of the FHS in building Nordic democracy (2015, p. 47) and go on to describe how after World War II this task was taken over by the public school system. The researchers show how concepts that the FHS ‘had used and aimed for over the course of decades had been incorporated in the visions of the State and the formal educational institutions’ (2015, p. 53).

This question of the role and identity of the FHS in contemporary Nordic society is discussed in national FHS organisations (Riis-Søndergaard, 2021). The question is also raised by the Norwegian government in commissioning an official report into the future role of the Norwegian FHS (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2021).

### ***Research on human rights education***

The limitations of an article format provide room for only a very condensed overview of research on HRE and of the UN Declaration of Human Rights Education and Training (DHRET). This overview follows the three central themes outlined in the second article of DHRET (U.N., 2011, art. 2.2), connecting these to material from the wider text of the Declaration and referring to core HRE research that has analysed and discussed these themes.

The first central theme in the second article of DHRET focuses on *learning about human rights*. While this refers to the acquisition of knowledge of HR (Osler & Yahya, 2017, p. 128), researchers have pointed out that the implied learning reaches wider than concrete learning (Al-Daraweesh & Snauwaert, 2018). The phrase ‘Understanding ... of the values that underpin them’ broadens the implied learning to include a wider learning that addresses not only knowledge but also affects the value system of the student (Tibbitts, 2017, p. 71; Osler, 2016, p. 5).

The second central theme describes HRE as *learning through human rights*. The DHRET reaffirms that the goal for HRE is ‘the full development of the human personality’ (Becker, 2020). Teaching should be implemented in a way that reflects HR (Bajaj, Cislighi & Mackie, 2016). Article 4 adds that HRE should aspire to develop ‘a universal culture of HR’ and to foster the student as a ‘responsible member of a free, peaceful, pluralist and inclusive society’ (U.N., 2011, art. 4(b); Osler, 2008, p. 456). Leading HRE researchers emphasise the need for HRE to be adapted and shaped to each national, social and cultural setting (Osler 2016).

The third central theme describes HRE as *learning for human rights*. HRE research gives numerous examples of practices aimed at empowering students to ‘promote, protect and effectively realize HR’ (Zembylas & Keet, 2018). HRE should enable participants to promote ‘understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations and all racial, ethnic or religious groups’ (Bajaj, 2017). The education should ‘embrace and enrich, as well as draw inspiration from the diversity of civilizations, religions, cultures and traditions of different countries, as it is reflected in the universality of human rights’ (Sjöborg & Ziebertz, 2017).

A critical perspective on the future of HRE is implicit in Hopgood's ‘The Endtimes of Human Rights’ (2013). Hopgood predicts that political and economic developments will create ‘a neo-Westphalian world’ where there is no longer a global consensus on HR.

### ***A development of social learning theory***

The theoretical framework for our analysis builds on Etienne Wenger's social learning theory (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). For the purposes of this paper a few central concepts are employed; more elaborate accounts of the redesign are presented elsewhere (Lövgren, 2019).

According to Wenger, the members of a community learn through the practices they perform and through the negotiation of the meaning of these practices (1998, pp. 52-55). For Wenger, ‘Human engagement in the world is first and foremost a process of negotiating meaning’ (1998, p. 53). The negotiation process is both social (negotiating practices) and individual (negotiating identity).

Renée DePalma (2009) develops the concept of a *transformative community of practice* as a critique of the limitations of Wenger's theory. A transformative community invites members to share in the negotiation of meaning (p. 365) and peripheral members are seen as an asset for their ability to see the community with fresh eyes (p. 367).

In 2015 Wenger presented a revision of the earlier theory with a focus on the negotiating of identity (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, pp. 19-26). Wenger describes learning in the 21st century as increasingly individualised (2015, p. 13). He uses the concept of *identity work* to describe the intense learning that takes place in *boundary meetings*. Wenger argues that education should develop a *boundary-oriented pedagogy* that leads students to new insights through boundary meetings and boundary crossings. Such a pedagogy shows how: ‘Combining multiple voices can produce a two-way critical stance through a mutual process of critique and engagement in reflection.’ (2015, p. 19).

The concepts of community, negotiation of meaning, transformative community of practice and boundary-oriented pedagogy will be developed further in the analysis of the empirical

material.

### **Empirical study**

The central empirical material of this paper is taken from a field study conducted during the 2014-2015 school year at two Norwegian FHS. The design for the field study included an initial student questionnaire, observations, video recordings, interviews and reflective texts (Lövgren, 2017). In this paper the analysis will focus on a specific part of this empirical material: reflective texts written by 60 students.

The two schools were found through a process of purposive sampling to represent different contextual factors such as location, age and size of the FHS. While one school was newly established and among the largest FHS, set in urban surroundings, the other was among the smaller and older FHS, set in rural surroundings. For the writing of the reflective texts no sampling was needed to acquire informants in the smaller school; all students were included in the material. In the larger school, where this was not possible, a case sampling was used to locate courses which were attended by students from all the school's main programmes (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 29).

In the instructions given to the informants before they wrote their texts, open-ended questions were used to capture the wider context of their total learning experience. Students were asked to describe:

What are the most important things that happened to you this year?

What have you experienced?

Describe events, situations and people that have meant a lot to you.

As the material from the 2015 field study was analysed in preparation for this article, the need for supplementary empirical material with a focus on global citizenship and HRE became evident. This was achieved by adding a new study which was done in April 2021. As the study was to supplement the initial field study with a focus on HRE, a non-probability or purposeful sampling of informants became necessary. By entering the words 'human rights' in the national database of the Norwegian FHS, three classes with a HRE focus from different schools were sampled.

To gather the data, the method used in the 2015 study was given a more focused design; students were guided through a process of writing reflective texts. The instructions were built around three themes; these ranged from the very open-ended ('What have you experienced at your FHS?') to asking the students to finish sentences like 'The FHS has inspired me to...'. The 2021 study produced 54 reflective texts. In the initial research as well as in the

supplementary study, students were given the option not to take part in the writing of reflective texts as well as the option to drop out of the session if they wanted to.

In both studies, the analysis of the documents was initiated as an abductive process (Afdal, 2015, p. 260). The student texts were read inductively to locate patterns in the material and find possible categories (Boréus & Bergström, 2005). This was followed by a content analysis (Franzosi, 2009), where words perceived as representing factors in global citizenship and HRE were identified.

The following section presents the reflective texts written by FHS students, divided into three main categories. Their captions represent three overarching themes of learning at the FHS (Lövgren, 2019): *community* is the context of learning where self is developed through identity work and *the Other* is the focus.

### **Community - the context of learning**

A common theme for students from all the five schools in the study is the many different social backgrounds that come together at the FHS. The schools are open to all, without any need for academic accomplishments or prior studies. The Nordic systems for state-funded stipends and student loans make the courses available for students with very different social and economic family backgrounds. This is reflected in the students' narratives of experiences of diversity within the student body. As students identify with the newly established community at the FHS, close relations are built and differences of social status, economic resources or religious upbringing become less relevant. The following quote paints a picture of such learning:

The people, the atmosphere, and the values that I have experienced here are indescribable. I have met, talked to, and got to know people that I would never have had a relationship with otherwise. It is awesome to relate to people from the upper-class areas of Oslo while at the same time including people from the opposite background, those who have really struggled. There have been so many good conversations that embrace everybody in a way I've never experienced anywhere else.

Students describe having gone through an intense period of boundary meetings in their initial identification with the community at the FHS. The boundary meetings lead to a process of learning where social walls and prejudices are challenged. Some informants characterise the social experience in the FHS and the learning it induces as fundamentally life-changing. One girl describes her learning like this:

I have learned to work together with all kinds of people. My roommate from Bolivia comes from a totally different cultural background than mine. This year I have been

in love. I have danced at a ball. I have become more Christian. I have learned that many, too many, struggle with heavy burdens from their former life. I have learned that many of the things I thought I knew well, I don't know at all.

A central element in the classes and seminars offered at the FHS are learning practices designed to activate processes towards global citizenship. These events include sessions in a more traditional school setting with subjects connected to HR and international involvement. However, students' accounts suggest that these processes happen most effectively outside the classroom. One example is students arranging social activities together with newly arrived refugees to Norway, an area where all the five schools in the study were involved. The learning and respect that these meetings engender are described as vital ingredients in students' development of a global consciousness. One girl writes:

I've learned a lot about people. I have learned about many different cultures and challenges that people face all over the world. I have also learned how people learn new things, and how strong individuals can be important to society.

Another central theme in a majority of the 2014-2015 texts (before the Covid-19 limitations of 2020-2022) is that of directly experiencing global injustice through travel. All five schools in the study include international travel as a central element in their pedagogical programmes, emphasising that the aim of these journeys is to enhance global consciousness. Teachers in charge of these study tours are either from the country visited by the students or have close connections to the local community where the group stays. The aim is that the programmes should be designed in dialogue with the local hosts to create meetings based on mutual dialogue and respect.

The personal meetings with global injustice and the boundary meetings that the travel involves are given much room in the students' account of their year. The experience of meeting 'the global Other' is described like this by one student:

Throughout our travels, we have met a whole bunch of different people, either instructors or friends of our teacher. Each person we have met has qualities that I look up to and admire.

### **Self-development through identity work**

The second main feature the students highlight in their reflective texts is that of personal development through negotiation of identity. This theme covers dimensions of increased self-reliance, becoming socialised into a community and seeing oneself as a part of a global humanity. A male student is one of many who uses the phrase 'to be myself 100%':

I've become more confident in myself. I have finally dared to be myself 100%. I also

feel I'm more part of a community, at a folk high school you never stand alone. I have friends around me all the time who support me. We make each other better.

The student quoted above describes how his experience of finding a more confident identity is closely related to being part of the community that develops through the year. The FHS experience is described as laying the groundwork for the strengthening of self-reliance.

The reflective texts often give descriptions of staff and teachers at the FHS. One student describes her experience of:

...having encountered equality. That everyone has the right to be heard and to express themselves, regardless of age and role here at school.... I feel I am taken seriously and treated as an adult and as a part of the community. This is because the staff are not authoritarian at all.

Several students ascribe their motivation for learning at the FHS to freedom from grades and exams. One student writes of learning at FHS as an experience 'where you simply are left to be free and learn a lot about yourself and others.' Another student puts it this way: 'It's pretty awesome when you do your utmost and use 100% of yourself, not because you want good grades, but because you really want to...'

The relationship between staff and students, as well as the teaching methods and learning experiences reflected in the student texts, establish a basis for an open process of personal development. The student texts provide a picture of a community where staff and students share in learning experiences. The learning practices introduced by the staff, as well as morning assemblies and even religious services, are described by students as open for questioning the values represented by the respective FHS.

People are motivated, committed and interested in what you do, and you want to learn and do as much as possible. We also get to be involved in deciding what we want to learn about.

### **The Other - the focus of learning**

The third section connects to students' descriptions of the FHS boundary-oriented pedagogy. The personal development described in the previous theme is the aim of this section. One student describes this:

I have gained a lot more self-confidence and have really been given the chance to express my opinions and use my freedom of speech. I'm no longer afraid to use my voice and I have become very confident in myself... The folk high school has inspired me to take more responsibility and to get involved in things that happen around me.

The experience of belonging to a community where global values are a part of the fellowship is described as decisive for some:

I have always been involved in the world around me, but what the folk high school has given me is the belief that we can do something about it. There's something about joining other people who are committed to the same things that you are. It gives you hope that we actually have a chance to make a difference. This was the main reason why I wanted to go to folk high school in the first place. I felt that the world had so many problems, and more were on their way, at the same time as I felt alone about the despair that we didn't do enough to fix it. Therefore, it was extremely important for my commitment to come to a place where we fight for the same things.

The analysis shows how students' engagement in global citizenship is focused on sustainable development and ecology. An understanding of human rights is often voiced as central to the implementation of sustainable development. One student defines a sustainable society:

We create a sustainable society by taking care of each other and the world around us. We must therefore ensure that our planet is healthy, so that we have a basis for life. And that the people on it are also taken care of, so that we don't create destructive patterns of action for ourselves and the planet. Human rights are therefore very important.

And another succinctly concludes:

I believe that we create a sustainable society by, among other things, getting human rights carried out, and keep working from there.

The third theme of empowering students to uphold the rights of others links to the learning aims of the Nordic FHS. The empirical study maps the students' description of *Community* as the centre of their year as FHS students. In the context of the community the student's *Self* develops through boundary meetings where *the Other* is the focus of learning.

## **Discussion**

In the discussion, empirical material from the presented studies will be further analysed by combining concepts from our theoretical perspectives and our introductory description of the Nordic FHS. The aim of this section is to answer the question: 'How do the identity and practices of the Nordic folk high schools reflect the ideals of human rights education?'

### ***Community - the internalisation of HR values***

In the introduction to this paper, the term *living interaction* is described as representing the central element in Grundtvig's pedagogical vision for the FHS. The term describes the process

of internalisation of democratic values, the goal of the 19th century FHS (Korsgaard, 2011, p. 35). In the field study, contemporary FHS students describe their experience of ‘so many good conversations that embrace everybody in a way I’ve never experienced anywhere else.’ The frequency of such references in the student texts indicates that boundary meetings between students are an integral part of the pedagogy of the Nordic FHS (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

Community as a pedagogical value is closely connected to the historical identity of the FHS, both in Grundtvig's central concept of a living interaction and in the practices of the initial schools established in Denmark by Kold (Skovmand, 1983). In the field study this can be seen in what the informants describe as the most important learning experience at their FHS, the deepened understanding and respect that come from boundary meetings with the Other. These experiences occur with fellow students as well as with the global contacts of the FHS. A close reading of the narratives presented by the FHS students discloses a boundary-oriented pedagogy that leads to identity work based on boundary meetings and boundary crossings (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). In HRE literature, the internalisation of HR values is referred to as a decisive part of ‘learning about’ HR (Tibbitts, 2017; Osler, 2016). This internalisation is closely related to the processes embedded in Grundtvig's term, ‘living interaction’. This suggests that the learning described reflects the aim UNDHRET sets for HRE to create a community defined by ‘a universal culture of HR’ (U.N., 2011, art. 2.2).

The empirical material describes a community where the negotiation of meaning is not dominated by the authorities, as implied by the student comment: ‘the staff is not authoritarian at all’. Another student writes: ‘everyone has the right to be heard and express themselves, regardless of age and role’. DePalma defines ‘a shared negotiation of meaning’ as the primary indicator of a *transformative community of practice* (2009, p. 357).

### ***The responsibility of the Self for the rights of the Other***

DHRET uses the phrase ‘Developing a universal culture of human rights, in which everyone is aware of their own rights and responsibilities in respect of the rights of others.’ A community that builds such a culture of HR will bring about ‘the development of the individual as a responsible member of a free, peaceful, pluralist and inclusive society.’ (U.N., 2011, art.4; Osler, 2008)

The second most prevalent theme or category in student texts is connected to the experience of finding greater self-value and self-confidence. In student descriptions of this development, there is a direct connection to a growing understanding and respect for the Other. The informants describe this increased awareness of ‘their own rights and responsibilities in respect of the rights of others’ in meetings with students and teachers on campus, but also in

classes on global issues and in experiences of travel. The descriptions of international boundary meetings are characterised by intense identity work as students are brought into boundary meetings with an unknown cultural and political setting. In these narratives the informants describe a learning experience that leads to an enhanced responsibility for the local and global realisation of HR.

When Grundtvig discusses enlightenment, he defines true enlightenment as a process that affects not only the learner's inner life, but must also include engagement in the local community, the nation and the world. Grundtvig's notion of enlightenment indicates both a call for social activism and a vision of global responsibility that were not common in his time (Korsgaard, 2000). Contemporary publications from central FHS organisations define global citizenship and global contacts as integral to the identity of the movement (Folkehøgskolerådet, 2017).

The present analysis indicates that there are elements in the pedagogical ideals represented by HRE that are reflected in the FHS. I would argue that research towards a development of this connection could strengthen the contemporary FHS' understanding of their identity and help define their role in Nordic society. The findings reveal a development whereby the focus of the FHS has moved from nation building to global citizenship education. Johanson & Bergstedt (2015) question the schools' contemporary role in a society where the national state has incorporated the initial project of the FHS. The analysis suggests that the primary focus of the FHS has moved from national to global HR-related issues.

The present analysis also describes the Nordic FHS as providing support for the upholding of a global consensus on HR. The Nordic FHS were initiated to build and protect society at a time when democracy was established and endangered (Westerman, 2009). Although Hopgood's (2013) predictions must be questioned, the developments he describes should be respected as a threat to HR. The introduction to this article gives a picture of the potential influence a movement such as the Nordic FHS can have. If this study is correct, the Nordic FHS are educational institutions with a value base and a pedagogical practice that in many ways reflects the ideals represented by HRE. I would suggest that it could also be of interest for HRE to promote further research into the theme of this article with the possible outcome of identifying the Nordic FHS as a regional adaption of HRE.

## **Conclusion**

This paper asks how the identity and practices of the Nordic folk high schools reflect the ideals of human rights education. The introduction to the article consists of an introduction to the history, ideology and pedagogical identity of the Nordic folk high schools. Grundtvig's vision of a *living interaction* has been characterised as the central element in the pedagogical identity

of the Nordic FHS. The term describes a twofold aim: teaching as a living dialogue between teacher and student, and students' development towards a living relationship with the community, the nation and the world (Korsgaard, 2011).

The second part of the article established links between relevant research from the fields of HRE and FHS. After the introduction of social learning as a theoretical perspective (Wenger, 1998; DePalma, 2009; Lövgren, 2019) two empirical studies were presented. Empirical material consisting of reflective texts written by FHS students was analysed under three overarching categories: *Community* as the context of learning where *Self* is developed through identity work, and *the Other* is the focus.

The analysis and discussion suggest a number of correlations between HRE and the identity and practice of the Nordic FHS. The students describe their FHS as transformative communities of practice (DePalma, 2009) where their voices are heard and the negotiation of meaning is shared between staff and students. The term 'a universal culture of HR' from DHRET and the development of the term in HRE research (Osler, 2008) describe a learning situation similar to the one presented in the student texts. In the empirical material students also describe an experience of self-development towards a greater self-value and self-reliance. DHRET affirms that HRE should 'be directed to the full development of the human personality' (UN, 2011). This direction is given a goal in Article 4 for the student to become a 'responsible member of a free, peaceful, pluralist and inclusive society'. In the narratives of the FHS students, self-development is described as an outward movement characterised by an enhanced responsibility for the local and global realisation of HR.

In my work with this article, I have found no empirical research on the connection between HRE and the Nordic FHS. By necessity, the project and the article that it has produced has been shaped by this. I have many times thought of the project as the mapping of an uncharted field of research. The article is written in the hope that future research will explore the field further. The historical and ideological links between HRE and the Nordic tradition of *folkbildning* can be developed in many directions that are worthy of further empirical research.

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