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FOLK HIGH SCHOOL AS A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR PARTICIPANTS WITH HIGH-FUNCTIONING AUTISM

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to explore the Folk High School as a supportive environment for participants with neuropsychiatric functional impairments, primarily high-functioning autism, from the perspectives of the participants, the staff, and the principals. The participants' perspective consisted of 21 interviews, the teachers' perspective was observed in three focus-group interviews, and the principal's perspective through 19 telephone interviews. Folk High School is shown to be supportive because it: (i) creates a safe and caring environment, (ii) places the individual participant at the centre of its operations, and (iii) is based on the provision and articulation of clear structures. A limited focus on the classroom and the course content is too narrow for a group of individuals with high-functioning autism. It is important to examine the relationships between different categories of workers and how they, in an interwoven symbiotic system, can provide the participants with the best possible conditions for learning.

Keywords: *education, folk high school, high-functioning autism, learning experiences, subjective inclusive environment*

LJUDSKA UNIVERZA KOT SPODBUDNO OKOLJE ZA UDELEŽENCE Z VISOKO FUNKCIONALNIM AVTIZMOM – POVZETEK

Članek se osredotoča na ljudsko izobraževanje na srednješolski ravni, ki ponuja spodbudno okolje za udeležence z nevropsihiatrično motnjo, predvsem visoko funkcionalnim avtizmom, z vidika udeležencev, zaposlenih in ravnateljev. V okviru študije je bilo izvedenih 21 intervjujev z udeleženci izobraževanja, trije intervjuji s ciljnimi skupinami učiteljev in 19 telefonskih intervjujev z ravnatelji. Ljudsko izobraževanje se je izkazalo za spodbudno, saj (i) ustvari varno in prijazno okolje, (ii) je osredinjeno na posameznika ter (iii) vzpostavi jasne strukture in oblike dela. Usmerjenost, ki je omejena zgolj na učilnico in učno

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vsebinsko, je za skupino posameznikov z visoko funkcionalnim avtizmom preveč ozka. Prav tako pa je pomembno raziskati odnos med različnimi vrstami zaposlenih in kako lahko ti kot medsebojno povezan simbiotični sistem udeležencem ponudijo najboljše možne pogoje za učenje.

Ključne besede: *izobraževanje, ljudska univerza, srednja šola, visoko funkcionalni avtizem, učne izkušnje, subjektivno vključujoče okolje*

INTRODUCTION

The situation for people who have different functional impairments in the West has worsened in several aspects. In 2003 the EU (European Commission, 2003) noted that access to both work and study opportunities was worse for people who had some form of functional impairment. Since then, it has further worsened because of increasing demands (OECD, 2010). Research has shown that people with high-functioning autism (HFA) generally find it more difficult to complete their education (Howlin & Moss, 2012; Levy & Perry, 2011) due to a lack of adaptations, bullying, and social exclusion (Dymond et al., 2017; Giarelli & Fisher, 2013; Nuske et al., 2019). The situation for people with HFA in Sweden follows the same pattern (Adolfsson & Simmeborn Fleischer, 2013; Larsson Abbad, 2007; Simmeborn Fleischer, 2012).

One can with some justification claim that people who have different functional impairments, for instance, HFA, are excluded from school, and in the long run, working life. This happens despite the fact that Sweden, like many other countries, has for a long time been inspired by UNESCO's ambition of "education for all" and the idea of integration where all students should, as far as possible, learn together in shared learning environments (UNESCO, 1994). The inclusion and integration available are often concentrated on geographical or objective aspects such as sharing classrooms with others, while less attention is paid to individuals' feelings of being included (Porter, 2000). Licsandru and Cui (2018) suggest "subjective social inclusion" as a concept to draw attention not only to the practical arrangements of inclusion but also to the interpersonal aspects. Furthermore, in an effort to increase our knowledge of this area, the National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools in Sweden (2017) has called for qualitative research and participant-centred perspectives with regards to students who have functional impairment and their own experiences of different forms of education. The ambition of this article is therefore to pay special attention to students with HFA and their experiences of their education, which offers different types of adaptations and support, and supplement these by also paying attention to how the staff and the principals perceive their education.

In Sweden, there are Folk High Schools (FHSs), which are institutions for "liberal" or "popular" education. In contradistinction to other educational institutions, FHSs have been able to meet the educational and social needs of people with functional impairments. These circumstances have aroused the interest of researchers who are interested in examining what it is that lies behind FHSs' success in offering a supportive environment

for participants with neuropsychiatric functional impairments, primarily those who have been diagnosed with HFA. This is of relevance because other educational institutions have not succeeded in doing what FHSs have done in this regard.

The aim of this article is to explore the Folk High School as a supportive environment for participants with neuropsychiatric functional impairments, primarily high-functioning autism, from the perspectives of the participants, the staff, and the principals.

Education as rehabilitation and habilitation

Even though one's education may not suffice to secure gainful employment (Andersson, 2008), the educational process itself can constitute a valuable environment in which an individual can grow and develop. Education thus has value in itself and should not merely be seen as a measure to be deployed on the job market. During one's education, in addition to the formal learning that takes place and is linked to specific subject content, *informal learning* takes place, learning which touches on one's social interaction and understanding of the world around us. In previous research, informal learning has been described as important to people with HFA since it contains valuable experiences for the individual alongside the subject content being taught (Adolfsson & Simmeborn Fleischer, 2013; Giarelli & Fisher, 2013; Simmeborn Fleischer, 2012). Such informal learning also includes becoming acquainted with certain social skills, i.e., *social learning*. Social learning is of particular relevance to people with HFA because they often suffer from a lack of social competence (Barnhill, 2007; Fiske & Taylor, 2013; Gillberg & Ehlers, 2006; Happé & Frith, 2006; Striano & Reid, 2008); note that this lack of social competence is a potential obstacle to obtaining gainful employment (Attwood, 2008) and becoming more socially included. Previous studies (Hedegaard & Hugo, 2017; Hugo & Hedegaard, 2017, 2020) have demonstrated the importance of social learning, especially since it provides opportunities for people with HFA to develop the ability to create social relationships and social networks, to have the courage to ask for help, and to engage in public speaking. Social learning can also be associated with formal learning and, as such, constitutes its own subject content. For example, there are three general FHS programs which are aimed at people with HFA. The aim of these programs is to offer the participants course content which helps them to understand themselves better, deal with everyday situations, and develop socially, which together can increase their subjective societal inclusion. In addition, there is an FHS program which is more career- and independent living-oriented, and is aimed at allowing participants to develop suitable skills so that they will fit in on the labour market and manage to live on their own (Folk High School, 2019), which increases the opportunities for more objective inclusion.

Folk High School as an Educational Approach

The FHS system is a unique school form in the Swedish education system because of its social dimensions and the way it creates meaningfulness for the participants who are enrolled there. In this context, every person's equal value is also emphasised (Andersén, 2011;

Bjursell & Nordvall, 2016; Paldanius, 2007). This entails that the FHS is based on fundamental principles of taking a holistic view of the individual and to knowledge that is related to a person's whole life-situation. Personal development and the individual's experience of meaningfulness are central to this approach. The people who study at the FHS are called *participants* in contrast to the rest of the Swedish education system. This follows from the FHS's principles with respect to personal freedom and voluntary action wherein participants are viewed as co-creators in the educational process (Andersén, 2011). The FHS also enjoys a long tradition of organising courses which have the expressed purpose of including people who have different needs, for example, people with functional impairments, senior citizens, people who have previously not succeeded in their educational endeavours, and newly-arrived immigrants/refugees (Kindblom, 2016; Nylander et al., 2015; Skogman, 2015; The Swedish National Council of Adult Education, 2018a).

According to Skogman (2015) and Nylander et al. (2015), the FHS is characterised by a certain "openness" and "accessibility" which facilitates the academic endeavours of participants with functional impairments. In 2017 the FHS received additional funding from the State (re-enforcement fund) which was to be spent on specific pedagogic support for participants with functional impairments (The Swedish National Council of Adult Education, 2018b). The proportion of participants with functional impairments at FHSs increased during the 2000s and the particular group which benefits from this re-enforcement funding today are participants with neuropsychiatric functional impairments (The Swedish National Council of Adult Education, 2018b), including people with HFA. Today, there are 156 FHSs in Sweden with approximately 57,000 participants enrolled in long-term courses (equivalent to programs at university) each year and approximately 54,000 participants who are enrolled in short courses (equivalent to independent courses at universities) (The Swedish National Council of Adult Education, 2019). One third of all participants enrolled in the general courses have a functional impairment. For specialised courses, this proportion is 13% (The Swedish National Council of Adult Education, 2017). In addition, 34 FHSs offer complete courses and programs which are solely adapted for participants with functional impairments. 8 of these 34 schools offer the same for young adults with HFA (Folk High School, 2019).

High-Functioning Autism

HFA falls under the diagnostic category of "neuropsychiatric functional impairment". People who are assigned this diagnosis are often attributed limitations such as a lack of social cognition (Barnhill, 2007; Cotter et al., 2018; Erol et al., 2018; Fiske & Taylor, 2013; Gillberg & Ehlers, 2006; Hinterbuchinger et al., 2018; Striano & Reid, 2008; Tulaci et al., 2018) and the ability to feel empathy (Bal et al., 2010; Golan et al., 2006; Wallace et al., 2011). Research has also shown that people with HFA have a lack of enterprise and are unable to take initiative (Adams & Jarrold, 2012; Low et al., 2009). Furthermore, they possess a reduced ability to make plans and to be flexible (Happé & Frith, 2006). This research has, however, been challenged by other studies which show that poor results on all types of tests may be attributed to the respondent's difficulties in understanding

what is expected of him/her from the testing psychiatrist and researcher, and may not be indicative of any specific cognitive impairment (White, 2013). The medical paradigm has a great deal of influence, however, and as a result of this influence, the *impaired* abilities are what is taken into account with respect to people who are diagnosed with HFA (Linton, 2014).

An understanding of these impaired abilities can provide information on how one might go about securing adequate support for people with HFA. A close examination of the individual's impairments during the diagnostic phase should be complemented with a "relational examination" with respect to the support to be provided in an educational context. This has been mandated by the Swedish National Council of Adult Education (2018b) with respect to the disbursement of the above-mentioned re-enforcement funding. We also note that in the *Discrimination Act* (Swedish Statute Book, 2008) and throughout the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare (2017) it is highlighted that the *context* is a strong factor which influences whether a functional impairment is an impediment or not. A functional impairment should thus be understood as something dynamic, in the sense that it emerges in the interaction between the person and the person's environment. This entails that the person's environment can potentially instantiate a functional impairment. Such a view on functional impairment has direct consequences on support arrangements. It is the social environment, in the form of norms and attitudes, in conjunction with the physical environment which needs to be adapted first, with the aim of being inclusive, supportive, and not posing a functional hindrance (Nirje, 1994).

In practical terms, the approach described above can entail, in a school context, for example, that inter-personal support and adapted school assignments be offered to the individual. In previous studies, the following adaptations have been shown to work for HFA students: (i) the possibility of working on one's own, (ii) focusing on one task at a time, and (iii) being given the freedom to decide how one will spend one's time (Hedegaard & Hugo, 2017; Hugo & Hedegaard, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

Selection and Research Methods

We initially identified which FHSs offer educational courses or programs for people with neuropsychiatric functional impairments. It was noted that 34 FHSs offer such courses or programs, of which 8 offered specific programs for participants with HFA.

Data collection took place at three of the eight above-mentioned FHSs during the autumn of 2017. These three FHSs offered several programs for participants with HFA. These included general courses which were adapted for participants with HFA (corresponds to upper secondary school), participants with HFA who attended "regular" integrated general courses without any specific adaptations together with participants without any impairments (also corresponds to upper secondary school), and participants who attended special preparatory courses which provided education in independent living, work-life,

and social competence. In total, five different courses were included in the study. Each of the 34 FHSs was contacted with the request that we interview the school principal. 19 principals obliged us with an interview.

The participant perspective is based on 21 research interviews with participants from five different study programs. All of the 21 participants were young adults, between the ages of 18 to 28 years of age, with HFA. 16 of the participants are men and 5 are women. 12 of the participants lived at the FHS. The participant interviews lasted between 21 and 80 minutes. The interviews were conducted separately. The interviews with the participants consisted of semi-structured life-world interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) and covered the overarching theme of their experiences of the FHS, such as relationships with teachers and other participants, as well as teaching and learning and coping with living by themselves at the school.

The perspective of the staff was studied through three focus-group interviews with teachers and social pedagogues (from now on called staff) from the same FHSs as the participants. The three focus-group interviews included five, four, and two respondents respectively, eight of whom are women and three are men. The duration of the focus-group interviews was between 67 and 72 minutes in length. The focus-group interview method (Halkier, 2010; Wibeck, 2010) is used in research and evaluation exercises with smaller groups, especially when the aim is to capture and understand both a group's shared experiences and individual experiences of a specific context which they are part of.

The perspective of the principals was recorded through telephone interviews with school principals and superintendents (from now on called principals) at 19 of the 34 FHSs which offer courses and programs for people with neuropsychiatric functional impairments. 8 female and 11 male principals chose to participate. These interviews were conducted by a research assistant who employed a structured interview approach. The reasons why the other principals declined to be interviewed were, primarily, because they were newly-appointed, did not have the time to be interviewed, or were tired of answering questionnaires. 7 of the 19 principals reported that their schools have offered, offer, or plan to offer courses that are specifically aimed at participants who have been diagnosed with HFA. The other principals reported that their schools offered courses for people with different functional impairments and that, in their general courses, they had participants with functional impairments.

All of the interviews mentioned above were transcribed and a qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) was performed in three steps. The interviews focused on the latent abstraction level (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004) in order to capture a condensed but broad description of the participants' experiences. The first step consisted of a careful reading in order to gain overall insight into the material. Based on this reading, the material was later encoded by keywords and phrases. In the final step, the material was read through again to create content categories based on the previous keywords and phrases. This procedure was similar for all three interview groups, but the participants' perspective

focused on the description of how young adults with HFA experience the FHS and the specially-adapted teaching that is offered there. The focus in the interviews with the staff was how teachers and social pedagogues describe their experiences of teaching and other support function arrangements. The focus in the interviews with the principals was more general and dealt with how the institution's operations are adapted for people with neuropsychiatric functional impairments, including those with HFA.

Ethical Considerations

The participants were informed of the aim of the study and they gave their consent to participate in the study. The respondents' right to integrity entails that they were treated and described in the study confidentially. In summary, we followed the ethical code which the humanities and social studies are governed by (Swedish Research Council, 2002; 2005).

RESULTS

The results are presented thematically in terms of the common features in the three perspectives which emerged in the interview material with regards to the factors which influence a FHS's ability to provide a supportive environment to the group of participants under discussion. These include: (i) a safe and caring atmosphere, (ii) placing the individual at the centre of the school's operations, and (iii) the provision and articulation of clear structures.

A Safe and Caring Atmosphere

All of the participants described the FHS as a safe and caring environment, where none of them had experienced any form of insult or felt socially excluded:

It feels nice... like I knew everyone after the first week. It feels like a community in some way. And I have understanding for other people's difficulties and they have an understanding for my own difficulties. So I dare to be more open. For me, this is a very positive thing. (D8)

A safe and caring environment should be ensured not just during class but also outside the classroom. This was possible because many of the participants often stay at the FHS's boarding facilities. This involves taking a holistic view of the participants' total life-situation and an awareness that the conditions for teaching and learning may very well be created outside the classroom. This is demonstrated by the support functions that are provided by the school, of which the participants report the social pedagogue, independent-living support staff, and personal assistants as being the most important part. The most important forms of support that is provided address getting up in the morning, maintaining a daily schedule, and being punctual. Several participants report that classroom teaching and learning has never been a problem for them. Instead, having consistent attendance is considered to be an issue. One participant states the following in this regard:

The biggest support I need in my studies is making sure I go off to class. This is the biggest problem that I've had throughout my whole school career. [...] Before, I never felt good at school, before I came here. When I finally came in here I started to work... I have no problem with that. [...] Before, if I woke up too late, then I didn't dare go to class, because I didn't want everyone to look at me. I felt so very bad because of that. [...] Now, I have someone who sends a message to me... if it's past nine then I get a message about that. (D17)

The support functions that the staff highlighted as relevant were the conversational support activities they offer and the help they provide regarding practical issues for the participants. A number of participants used professional conversational support provided by a psychologist or school curator, whilst a greater number of the participants spoke directly with their teacher, mentor, and/or social pedagogue. Above all, the need for an adult who is present and who has the ability to create a trusting relationship with the participant was highlighted as important. The following report about conversational support was made during a focus-group interview:

It's really important that they're supported in their communication with us teachers... or the assistants. That someone... it can be a mentor or someone else... helps to create a good relationship with the teachers. And to find forms of communication... because it might not be the case that you can talk... we have tried loads of different [forms]... you can write a diary every week... or you can send an email... or talk... if communication becomes difficult then that's a very important support function. (FHS2)

Irrespective of whether conversational support is provided by a psychologist, curator, teacher, mentor and/or a social pedagogue, it is key to whether a participant is able to have their individual needs met and thereby feel safer. Regarding the more tangible, practical support that is provided – this may include a wake-up call in the morning, making sure that participants retire at a reasonable time at night, and acting as an informal escort for a participant who is about to enter a new and unknown social environment. This practical support function is primarily performed by the social pedagogues. However, whatever role an individual holds within the organisation, the staff were in agreement that it was this type of support that the participants are most in need of.

The principals also emphasised the importance of a safe and caring environment. The mere provision of an education was not enough; the principals try to ensure that each participant's whole-life was functioning properly; including the participant's school attendance, independent living, and use of leisure time, as a way to a safe and supportive learning environment:

In fact there's not much difference between this group and regular students. What are needed are adaptations to accessibility. There's no lack of ability to

learn, there's no lack of intelligence, but rather, it's a question of accessibility and is a democratic question. So, we work hard so that everyone can have the same opportunities. (R14)

The principals noted that, given that each individual is different, it is important that the education system offers different pathways, so that everyone can enjoy the same opportunities and benefit from the education that society offers. The principals are well-aware of the fact that participants with functional impairments can experience difficult times as they progress through the education system, before they come to the FHS:

There are many sad school stories. When they come to us, they've often gone through the compulsory school system and failed. They've tried high school studies and failed. It's a long journey to take even if you possess the intellectual capacity. [...] They're broken, you might say. (R17)

Taken together, it seems that the priorities which the staff and principals make with respect to creating a safe and supportive environment are appreciated by the participants.

Placing the Individual Participant at the Centre of School Operations

According to the participants, it was clear that they are given attention to as individuals and their individual needs are satisfied at the FHS, as shown in the first theme. When it comes to more classroom-related support, many of the participants report that it was the first time in their educational careers that they were provided with classroom instruction that worked for them and that they felt that they could succeed in their studies. The participants state that they feel less stressed by their studies than previously thanks to the FHS's ability to deal with each person individually. The study pace was also experienced as being more manageable than their previous school experience:

The teachers are very knowledgeable... the studies are adapted after the diagnosis [...]. Very nice teachers and they're understanding of me, if, for example, I don't understand something, so they can explain it to me so I do understand. (D2)

A frequent way that teachers individualised their teaching was to give the participants extra time, including extra time to become used to studying, being punctual, and making demands of oneself. The teachers also gave them time to build up their self-confidence and self-worth. The initial journey for these participants is often long and arduous because of their previous life-situation, which included isolation and social exclusion, as well as painful experiences from their previous school attendance. They need time to "re-set" – a time where discretion and compliance are paramount. The educational context then becomes an environment where participants are provided with the opportunity to build-up themselves and their abilities, step-by-step. During one focus-group interview with the staff, the following was reported concerning the function of the educational experience with respect to creating a safe and individually-adapted environment for the participants:

I would say that what's special about it is that you need... perhaps what you have planned doesn't work, in fact you need a certain degree of, to individually find out what works for the participants. Perhaps not all the time, but during the courses, you know, or the educational time, so I usually speak individually to them. And that I feel that sometimes there'll be a situation where they come to a halt, and there's some kind of issue... something that I, as a teacher, need to solve. (FHS1)

The majority of these participants had adapted study timetables which allowed them to study only a few subjects simultaneously and they had the opportunity to complete one task/assignment before they started a new one. The placement of the individual participant at the centre of the school's operations was also made apparent during the interviews with the principals. One principal highlighted the fact that the whole of the FHS's pedagogic approach was directed at taking the individual into account:

The whole teaching team is well-acquainted with adapting their teaching to the group that we have. This is because of the foundations of the Folk High School pedagogic approach, that we're not controlled by syllabi from the State, like every other school environment, but instead we construct our own syllabi and course plans together with the participants whilst they are studying, which results in us adapting the manner in which our operations are conducted, not daily, but quite often. (R2)

The way of working which exists at the FHS establishes a good foundation which can be used to (i) identify the needs of those individuals who attend the FHS, (ii) take note of what abilities they have, and (iii) determine how these abilities can be used to support the participants' educational endeavours. During the interviews, a number of questions were asked about educational courses and programs that are aimed at people with neuropsychiatric functional impairments, especially people with HFA. However, most of the principals chose not to differentiate one diagnosis from another: "The course participants say that they're here because we treat them like any other person who, however, needs some support, somewhat like a person who has poor sight might need spectacles" (R5). Several principals think that it was problematic to categorise people into different categories and shied away from using the term *functional impairment*. The preferred term at FHSs is *functional variation*: "My school board wants me to say *functional variation*" (R2). Some principals claim that terminology is a complex question, and it is complex because people with the same diagnosis can be quite different.

Whatever functional variation or functional impairment the individual may have, we usually say: 'Ok, you have this type of diagnosis but how are things working out for you?' This is because variation within a diagnosis and across-diagnosed individuals is so great that the diagnosis itself says too little. Then we talk to the individual and often engage in nice conversations with the

individual who might say: 'I find it difficult in these types of situations.' And then we reply: 'OK, then we'll support you in how you deal with or avoid these situations'. (R2)

There exists a longstanding tradition within the FHS movement to place the individual at the centre of things while simultaneously viewing the individual as part of a larger cultural and social context. This approach was apparent in the interviews with the participants, the staff, and the principals.

The Provision and Articulation of Clear Structures

Participants with HFA can have a diminished ability to plan things and to be flexible. In the interviews, the need for a clear structure was spoken about, a structure which includes clearly delimited and clearly formulated study assignments:

When it works best for me... that's when... 'This is what we're going to do'... that's when there's a clear assignment and it's clearly set out what the assignment is and how much. I don't like to be set a deadline... because I get stressed about it. I want a clear ending [...]. It feels like a very clear arrangement and that's a very positive thing for me. (D5)

During classroom discussions, a clear structure is also important. Everyone should be allowed to speak in turn, and the participants should know when their turn to speak is, so that they can prepare themselves for that:

I feel more comfortable that our turns are set out... the teacher is quite good at that... so everyone can say what they think, you know. I've always found it difficult to be the one who expresses opinions. (D7)

One reason why clear structures and instructions are provided is because this creates predictability, something which the participants appreciate. Knowing exactly what is going to happen during a lesson, throughout the school day, and even throughout the school week (both inside and outside the classroom), subjects the participants to less stress and anxiety caused by unforeseen events:

On Mondays, during the first class hour, they explain what'll happen during the week and what you should think about... sometimes they tell [us] about some after-school activities [...]. It's nice to know what's happening during the week... nice to know what'll happen. If we didn't have weekly planning then we'd be quite stressed. It's nice to have weekly planning instead of being shocked every time... oh dear now something new is happening today... oh dear now again and once more. Then you get stressed [...] every class which we have here they set it out, what'll happen during the lesson [...] [and] I think that's really good. Later, after two hours, it's time for food. You also get to see

the menu... what food is on offer. Then you know, oh yes, I can eat this food today. Then you can focus on what'll be for supper. (D16)

During the focus group interviews, a picture of what it means to teach these participants with HFA emerged. The staff members with previous experience of teaching at a "regular" school remarked that there was not a great difference between teaching at an FHS with participants with HFA and what they did before. However, one difference was their opinion that participants with HFA were in greater need of understanding the purpose of a lesson and of social activities. Consequently, more time was required to provide motivation for why different educational activities were to be performed. Furthermore, it was noted that the introduction of spontaneous elements in a lesson did not work:

everything must follow a clear theme... it doesn't work if you do an activity which does not fulfil a function and which I cannot motivate... 'what should I do, and why, and for how long, and with whom'... if it's not clear... then it's better not to do anything... and we've noticed... that we're going to add subjects to other courses... and 'now we'll do something fun'... it always goes wrong. (FHS1)

This need to always understand the purpose of each teaching element is linked to the participants' often genuine and specialist interests. In parts of a subject, the participants might be so knowledgeable that the challenge for the teacher is to find sufficiently stimulating assignments for them to maintain their motivation. In other parts of a subject, their lack of knowledge might be evident. Taken together, this situation often required the teachers to seesaw between levels within one and the same subject. In such cases, it is important to continually link new knowledge to existing knowledge, to areas where the participants already have high levels of motivation. The principals also identified "structure" as a fundamental aspect which had to be present if the teaching was to work for the participants:

There are clear routines, Monday to Friday. We go through the week and all the practical aspects. Each day is pretty well mapped out. Then we have individual relaxation rooms and we also have the possibility that they can eat in peace in the dining room. Many of them are particularly sensitive to noise; they have problems with loud noises and such. (R10)

Some of the principals remark that this is a way of working that makes extreme demands on the available resources. However, this was necessary if things are to work for these participants. One way of dealing with this logistically is to make a great deal of resources available to the participants at the beginning of a course to create understanding and to establish a common ground from which to move on from.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this article was to explore the Folk High School as a supportive environment for participants with neuropsychiatric functional impairments, primarily high-functioning autism, from the perspectives of the participants, the staff, and the principals.

We found that the FHS functions as a supportive environment for participants with neuropsychiatric functional impairments by (i) creating a safe and caring environment, (ii) placing the individual participant at the centre of its operations, and (iii) including the provision and articulation of clear structures.

A safe and caring environment is based on a holistic view of the social context. A narrow focus on the classroom and course content is too restrictive for people with HFA. Given that it is quite common for students at an FHS to board there, it is possible to adopt a holistic stance towards the individuals' everyday activities and their development. According to Skogman (2015) and Nylander et al. (2015), the FHS is characterised by "openness" and "accessibility" which facilitates the academic endeavours of participants with HFA. This observation is in agreement with the results of our study, where the FHS is described as accessible and suitably adapted to the participants. These adaptations include those made in and outside the classroom, both of which facilitate teaching.

Placing the individual participant at the centre of its operations entails basing the teaching on the individuals' needs more than on the course content. Key to such teaching is a form of participation which focuses on the *learning individual*, not on the subject *per se*. This approach can be linked to the FHS's institutional values and principles and the social and meaningful dimensions which stem from the holistic view that knowledge is related to a person's whole life situation (Andersén, 2011; Bjursell & Nordvall, 2016; Paldanius, 2007). As previous research (Hugo & Hedegaard, 2020) has also noted, the fact that teaching at FHSs is centred on the participant also means that participants are provided with the opportunity to work at their own pace and they are not stressed by demands of achieving certain goals within a set time limit, as is the case in other schools. The result of this is that it often takes somewhat longer to complete various courses. Teaching at FHSs is presented in a manner which is congruent with the principle that "the learning that takes place at FHS is based on inter-personal interaction where the participants are viewed as co-creators in processes which are informed by every person's equal value" (Andersén, 2011; Bjursell & Nordvall, 2016; Paldanius, 2007). This is demonstrated by the fact that the participants are listened to and may participate in the planning of the delivery of course content.

The provision and articulation of clear structures was mentioned with respect to the participants' situation as a whole; dining schedules as well as the structure of the teaching were important. The importance of clear and controlling (but also individually adapted) structures was present in all three perspectives. Previous studies have highlighted a lack of enterprise and an inability to take initiative among people who have been diagnosed with HFA (Adams & Jarrold, 2012; Low et al., 2009), as well as a diminished ability to

engage in planning, and to be flexible (Happé & Frith, 2006). Providing clear structure is thus one way in which participants with HFA are supported. There exists, however, a risk that clear structures and control might clash with the staff's and principal's ideas concerning self-responsibility, as espoused by FHSs foundational principle that people's participation must be "free and voluntary". In this context, "free and voluntary" means that participation is voluntary and the individuals are expected to behave in an independent manner and take responsibility for their own learning. With respect to the specific group under discussion here, these principles are put to the test. Questions may be raised concerning how much social responsibility a teacher (or other members of staff) should take on.

CONCLUSION

The FHS appears, primarily through the participants' experiences but also through the stories of the staff and principals, as a supportive and inclusive environment for participants with HFA. The forms of education we have studied within the framework of this study are all non-integrated and can, based on UNESCO's definition of inclusion (1994), be considered as excluded. However, by (above all) taking part in the 21 participants' experiences of the FHS and also their previous experiences of objectively inclusive education (Porter, 2000) where the participants were often met with intolerance, a lack of understanding and social exclusion, the present study has contributed to the knowledge on how subjective social inclusion (Licsandru & Cui, 2018) can be expressed in practice. Instead of being constantly integrated and practically included in "regular" classes at FHS, participants with neuropsychiatric functional impairments, primarily high-functioning autism, regularly engage in activities with participants from other classes at the FHS outside the classroom (this can be anything from lunch to various cultural events) as part of the training included in the education. There seems to be an awareness at FHSs that subjective social inclusion can be created and/or experienced despite practical classroom-related exclusion, which, based on many of the participants' previous school experiences, should be shown by more education providers.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The FHS is often presented as an educational institution which can meet the needs of certain groups of individuals who have not achieved success in other educational contexts. The positive experiences which were reported in the interviews may partially depend on the fact that there was an initial selection process regarding who participated in the study, for example, that those participants who like the FHS also remain there. If there were participants who did not have such a positive experience, they had probably left by the time we conducted our interviews, and thus they were not represented in the study. The fact that the participants were older than they were when they attended compulsory school and/or high school may also be of further relevance. However, the potential influence of the participants' age remains to be investigated further in future studies.

Implications

Notwithstanding the limitations of this study, it has contributed to the field with valuable knowledge. Using the three perspectives on the FHS, we conclude that the existence of an inclusive environment for people with HFA is a function of understanding the individual's complete context and life circumstances. This is the case if one wishes to provide a learning experience which contributes to a person's personal and social growth that allows the individual to benefit from the educational content that is offered. A limited, narrow focus on the classroom and subject content is thus too restrictive for people with HFA. The participants were satisfied with their studies at the FHS, and the principals emphasised that focus should not be placed on the diagnosis but rather on the individual – devoting attention to every individual to come to an understanding of what works for each person. The participants, staff, and principals were all in agreement about the importance of clear and controlling structures which are individually adapted to suit the participants' needs. We note a certain difference in how the participants view the social pedagogue as being key to enjoying a functional everyday life, whilst the staff and the principals emphasised the need for special pedagogues. Regarding the holistic approach which the FHS endorses, it is important not to emphasise hierarchies and the distribution of different responsibilities; instead, it is important to appreciate the relationships existing between different professional categories and note how they are woven together into a symbiotic relationship as they strive to provide the best possible conditions conducive to learning.

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