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Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig and Danish Folk High Schools: Tracing their Influence on Lifelong Learning in The USA

Mª Carmen Pérez Rodrigo[1]

ABSTRACT

The Danish Folk High School movement, rooted in the educational philosophy of the Danish Lutheran pastor and scholar N. F. S. Grundtvig (1783–1872), became a defining force that transcended the Nordic adult-education tradition and spread internationally, including to the United States, where its influence is particularly significant given the country's political and economic weight and its role in shaping global educational trends.

Drawing on empirical sources, including historical records of Danish-American folk schools, archival materials from the Highlander Folk School, and biographical accounts of key educators such as Jane Addams, the present study traces the arrival, adaptation, and enduring impact of the FHS model and Gruntvig´s andragogy in the US, with the aim of understanding their long-term influence on American educational and civic traditions.

KEYWORDS

NFS Grundtvig, Danish Folk High Schools, settlement houses, Folk Schools in the USA, Community Colleges, Highlander Folk High School

Introduction

The concept "popular education" gained momentum in Europe during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in a period known as the Age of Revolutions. During this time, movements across Europe and the Americas challenged absolute monarchies, promoted constitutional governance, and advanced social and educational reforms inspired by Enlightenment ideals, while responding to the profound transformations brought about by the Industrial Revolution (Skinningsrud & Skjelmo, 2016, pp. 25–26).

In Denmark, the idea of adult education emerged alongside reforms for basic schooling for all children, and in 1814, the School Acts aimed to establish a unified public education system. This development paralleled similar efforts across Europe, including *folkskoler* in Sweden, *Volksschulen* in German-speaking regions, and common schools in English-speaking countries. However, the School Acts also institutionalized social stratification: common schools (*almueskoler*) served working-class children, while private or more advanced grammar schools (*realskoler*) catered to children from wealthier families (Larsen, 2017, pp. 4–5, 22).

[1] University of Valencia; macarmperz@gmail.com

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By 1850, schooling still reflected social inequalities and patriarchal structures. Economic crises, inconsistent enforcement, and conservative attitudes limited the reach of compulsory education (Larsen, 2017, pp. 7–13) but the wars with Schleswig-Holstein (1848–1850) and the defeat in 1864 fostered a national resolve for internal renewal (Damsholt, 2011, p. 215) and amid this milieu, Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783–1872) —a Protestant cleric, theologian and philosopher, considered the Father of the Folk High School Movement (Folk High School, 2025. para.1)—emerged as a leading force in redefining Danish education, emphasizing non-formal, life-oriented learning that nurtured civic, cultural, and personal development.

Current literature on Folk High Schools encompasses two major strands: analyses of Grundtvig's democratic and lifelong learning ideals, and international diffusion of the model, especially within the Nordic region and Central and Eastern Europe, while also sporadically documenting adaptations in countries such as Tanzania, Japan, Bangladesh or the United States.

However, few researches have examined the full trajectory of the movement in these latter contexts, and in the case of the United States, the influence on major educators and the connections with other institutions, such as settlement houses and community colleges (Smith, 1996 paras. 6, 10; Hall, 1970 preface p.1; Warren, 1989/2011). The need to cover this significant gap is what provides the rationale for the present essay.

The Figure of Gruntvig and Folk High Schools as the Shapers of a New Denmark

Grundtvig's idea of the folk high school was the result of several influences. In terms of the residential aspect, he was no doubt influenced by his visits to England around 1830, during which he was greatly impressed by the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge. However, he immediately realized that these colleges were the preserve of a privileged class. He was also impressed by the excesses of the French Revolution and by the writings of Condorcet, especially the *Legal Report on the General Organization of Public Instruction* (1792), in which the French philosopher defended a type of education that was secular, democratic, and promoted autonomy, freedom, and equality—principles that Grundtvig also embraced. (Kulich, 1964, p. 417; Montes Martín, 2016, p. 222, as cited in Medina Fernández, 2017, p. 77).

The Danish thinker strongly opposed the rote learning and narrow curricula of traditional schools, particularly the *realskoler* and other elite Latin-based institutions, which he saw as designed merely to fill minds and suppress imagination and independent thought. (Kunt, 2010, p. 234) Grundtvig famously labeled these institutions "Black Schools" (*sorte skoler*) and "Schools of Death" (*dødens skoler*, sometimes translated as "Schools for Death"), expressions that underscored his belief that such schools focused on dead languages and extinguished the spirit and joy of learning by imposing examinations on content disconnected from life experience and civic engagement (Marais, 1911, p.15)

With this vision in mind, around the 1830s Grundtvig began promoting the establishment of "lay Schools for Life" — 'lay' because, although these schools reflected a genuine Christian spirit in daily practice, they were not to be controlled by any ecclesiastical

party, and 'for life' because education was a lifelong process which had to be grounded in lived experience rather than doctrine.

Human development—fostered through what the Danish reformer called the "living word," namely dialogue, discussion, and shared experiences—was prioritized over purely book-based learning. Education was regarded as a shared journey of personal and social growth rather than a one-way transfer of information and to this end, students and teachers lived together in a communal setting, where daily life itself became a site of learning, of harmonizing the discordant elements, binding all classes together in the common bond of love of fatherland reinforcing thus, social bonds (Rasmussen, 2013, p. 3; Kunt, 2010, p. 241)

Grundtvig's Legacy And The Introduction Of Folk High Schools In The United States

In his 1836 book *The Danish Four-Leaf Clover, or Danish Nationality Looked at from a Partial Point of View*, Gruntvig clarified that this school was intended for the "age of discretion"—that is, young adults who were mature enough to reason, reflect, and engage meaningfully in civic social life—not for boys, women, or children. (Fogh, 1914, Preface) He also suggested that an ideal location for such a school was Sorø Academy, established in 1826 by the King of Denmark.

When institutional and ideological obstacles prevented him from transforming the academy into the kind of educational environment he imagined, Grundtvig largely left the task of founding schools to his followers. This is why The first Folk High School was established in Rødding in 1844 by Grundtvig's disciple Christian Flor. Another disciple, Christen Kold, founded his own school in Ryslinge in 1851, marking the moment when the Folk High School movement truly began to take shape and between 1844 and 1896, no fewer than 120,000 students attended the Danish Peasants' High Schools (Marais, 1911, p. 35; Coe, 2000, p 1)[2].

Although each Folk High School adapted to local needs and contexts, they shared a set of defining characteristics that distinguished them from traditional educational institutions. All these schools prioritized non-formal education, offering no degrees or diplomas, and instead focused on personal growth, civic engagement, and lifelong learning. And these characteristics were largely maintained even when the Folk High School model spread beyond Denmark first to neighboring Nordic countries and later to other parts of the world, such as Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic states (Poland, Hungary, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), the United States, Canada, Japan, Nigeria, Tanzania etc., (Rasmussen, 2013, p. 6).

In addition to national influences and cross-border interactions through publications, international exchanges, World's Fairs, and cooperation among educators (Larsen, 2020, p. 38; Stubblefield, 1988, pp. 49–63) —migration also played a key role in the spread of folk high schools in the United States (Rasmussen, 2013, p. 5).

[2] "Danish Peasants' High Schools" was one of the several terms historically employed to refer to Folk High Schools, alongside others such as High Schools of the People (Kunt, 2010), People's High Schools (Kazamias, 2023; Broadbridge, 2022), Folk Universities (Malinewski, 2016; Frisch, 1949), or even People's Universities (Sheppard, 2018).

Around 1900 thousands of Danes scattered over the country and particularly over the Middle West and old folk high-school students and teachers who found it hard to forgot the teachings of their early school days decided to transplant their homeland model in the new land. That was the case of Rev Olaf Kirkeberg, who opened the first danish-American Folk High School in Elk Horn, Iowa in 1874; Rev. H. J. Pederson, who founded another at Ashland, Michigan, in 1882, and many other reverends and teachers who opened schools at Blair and Nysted (Nebrasca), Des Moines (Iowa), Tyler and Grant (Minnessota), West Denmark, (Wisconsin), Kenmare, (North Dakota) Solvang, (California) etc., (Foght, 1914, p. 85; Litsheim, 2010, p. 19).

Not to mention that in the early 1900s, the Danish folk school model was attractive to political progressives in the U.S. who wanted to trasplant the Danish model in order to vitalize and bring about fundamental change among farmers, hill people, and the poor in America (Bagley and Rust, 2009, p. 292). Poconos People's College near Henryville, Pennsylvania and Waddington People's College in Wheeling, West Virginia developed out of this interest. (Eiben, 2015, para. 6) Other early folk schools in the United States were the John C. Campbell Folk School, founded in 1925 in Brasstown, North Carolina, and the largest folk school in the U.S. today or The Clearing Folk School, founded in 1935 in Ellison Bay, Wisconsin, by Jens Jensen although, the most important from a historical point of view is Highlander Folk School, renamed in recent years, Highlander Education and Research Center[3].

Highlander first focused on labor and adult education but shifted to race relations by the early 1950s. Many key civil rights figures, including Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Septima Clark, Esau Jenkins, Bernice Robinson, Ralph Abernathy, and John Lewis, trained or participated there and they were shaped in part by the teachings of the great Nordic philosopher (Obama, 2016; MLK Jr. Research and Education Institute, n.d.).

For Grundtvig, to be a human being was to accept and take pride in one's community connection and cultural identity. His philosophy of learning was based on an understanding of human identity that included an individual identity, a cultural identity, and a democratic identity. Individual identity could not be separated from community, and the wholeness of the individual happened in the connection with community. Grundtvig encouraged placing human identity at the core of education as people attending Highlander Folk High School did[4] (Lawson, 1991 quoted in Eiben, 2015, para. 2).

[3] Founder Myles Horton first learned of the Danish folk school model from Danish-born Lutheran minister James A. Dombrowski while studying sociology at the University of Chicago. He subsequently studied Danish language, culture, and folk schools—supplemented by works such as J. C. Campbell's The Southern Highlander and His Homeland (1921)— and visited Denmark in 1931 to observe folk high schools firsthand. Deeply impressed, Horton returned to the United States in 1932 and, with educator Don West, established the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee. From the outset, Highlander adopted a flexible, nonformal approach to education with no grades, exams, or degrees, allowing student needs to shape the curriculum (Bagley & Rust, 2009, p. 294).

[4] As reflected in its Web site mission statement, Highlander's goals are very much in line with that of Scandinavian folk high schools: The goal of Highlander was and still is to provide education and support to poor and working people fighting economic injustice, poverty, prejudice, and environmental destruction. They help grassroots leaders create the tools necessary for building broad-based movements for change. (Bagley and Rust, 2009, p, 294).

Not all Folk High Schools were so influential. A number of them could not sustain themselves and eventually died a natural death[5], others were transformed into degree-granting colleges, such as Grand View College in Iowa or Berea College in Kentucky or evolved and took on a variety of forms and names such as agricultural schools, rural schools of household economics, moonlight schools (Foght, 1914, pp. 29, 30, 92; Stewart, 2018), or even 4-H clubs, whose "Head, Heart, Hands, and Health" motto and emblematic four-leaf clover logo recall Grundtvig's educational ideals (Virginia Cooperative Extension, n.d.; Parker, 2024; Robertson, 2002, p.9).

American Folk Schools, Settlement Houses, And Community Colleges

American interest in community-based education—including folk schools—resurged in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1976, the Folk School Association of America (FSAA), now the Institute for People's Education and Action (IPEA), was founded to "advocate and organize around the Scandinavian concept of the folk school as an adult learning center" (Bagley & Rust, 2009, p. 292). Today, its members include a diverse range of institutions: folk schools; micro-colleges—small independent colleges offering specialized or experiential programs, such as Thoreau College in Wisconsin and Deep Springs College in California (Hundt, 2024); heritage learning centers; farm schools; community learning centers; historical societies; cultural centers; and homesteading learning centers teaching practical self-sufficiency skills, such as the Ploughshare Institute for Sustainable Culture in Texas, Bee Tree Folk School in Idaho, and Adirondack Folk School in New York (Folk School Alliance, 2023; Eiben, 2015).

Folk Schools varied according to local needs and conditions. As Foght (1914) observed, "the form of the school had to be modified for successful transplanting to English-speaking countries, and this was inherent in the very nature of the schools and in the principles and ideals out of which they had grown" (Letter of Transmittal, p. 5). Attempts by Danish immigrants around the turn of the century to transplant the model without adaptation often failed due to the emphasis on assimilation in the United States (Kulich, 1988, p. 1). The original concept inspired numerous educational experiments, but as the Folk School Alliance (2023) states, "No matter what form schools take, the important thing is that they aim to strengthen communities".

On the other hand, beyond the founding of centers, there was another important avenue through which the philosophy of the Great Dane entered the United States. This was the significant influence he had on major adult-education theorists like Joseph K. Hart (1876–1949)[6] or E. C. Lindeman—often called the father of adult education in the United States

[5] Many folk schools were ultimately short lived particularly as community colleges began to blossom across the country and addressed many of the needs previously met by folk schools. (Larson, 1980 as cited in Bagley and Rust, 2009, p. 292)

[6] Joseph K. Hart (1876–1949) shared credit with Eduard C. Lindeman for incorporating elements of the Danish folk school idea into an American theory of adult education. Hart's interest was longstanding—already evident in his Educational Resources of Village and Rural Communities (1913)—and deepened after his 1925 visit to Denmark. He described his experiences in three Survey Graphic articles (1926), later expanded into Light From the North (1927a), one of the earliest books to introduce the Danish folk high schools to U.S. readers. In Adult Education (1927b), he again highlighted the "Danish People's Colleges" as a guiding example for American educational reform. (Stubblefield, 1988, pp. 49–63).

(Litsheim, 2010, p. 36) —who, in turn, passed this legacy on to many others. And, as a result of this indirect -and often underrecognized influence-, the andragogical assumptions of American adult educators virtually mirror those of N. F. S. Grundtvig (Warren, 1989, p. 211; 2011, p. 353).

Another important figure in American education was John Dewey, whose 1916 book *Democracy and Education* and broader work are widely recognized as foundational to progressive education, emphasizing experiential learning, critical thinking, and democratic participation (Teachers Institute, 2023, para. 1). Dewey's ideas and work also influenced Lindeman (Smith, 2007, para. 6) and Jane Addams, a leading figure in American social work and the settlement house movement (Fischer, 2009, p. 442).

Settlement houses, which became one of the most influential organizations in American social welfare (Hansan, 2011, para. 1), evolved in many cases into community centers, nonprofit organizations, or social service agencies, providing educational, cultural, and civic programs in impoverished urban districts, often serving immigrant communities. They functioned as urban equivalents of Folk High Schools, although their introduction to the country came not through the Danish model but via the United Kingdom. Dewey's and Lindeman's engagement with Hull House in Chricago— one of the first and most prominent settlement houses in the U.S., founded in 1889 by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr— profoundly shaped their educational visions.

In her biographical book *Twenty Years at Hull House*, Jane Addams linked urban settlements, educational reform, and rural experiments. She recounted her interactions with John Dewey during his residency at Hull House, noted other settlements such as "state colonies for the care of epileptics," and described her own "pastoral enterprise," purchasing a farm and flock of sheep in response to the dire conditions of western farmers (pp. 79–80, 236–237, 312). Addams also referenced Robert Owen, whose cooperative initiatives influenced Grundtvig and Lindeman, and described plans for a "country colony," realized at Ruskin, Tennessee, as well as an "agricultural colony" in Alabama supported by Hull House and connected to the Italian immigrant community (pp. 142–143, 232).

These examples show that social settlement leaders such as Addams, were aware of—and sometimes connected with—other educational and civic initiatives aimed at empowering communities, creating a network of experimentation across both urban and rural contexts. Despite their differences, Folk High Schools and Social Settlements were far from siloed experiments. They shared ideas, methods, and goals, as also happened with other institutions such as Community Colleges –sometimes referred to as junior colleges, two-year colleges, technical colleges, technical institutes, county colleges, or branch campus- which have also been regarded by scholars such as Greenberg, (1991 as cited in Bagley and Rust, 2009, p. 279, 281, 295) as American "equivalents" or "counterparts" of The Scandinavian folk high school model[7].

[7] Community colleges in America trace their origins to the Morrill Act of 1862, which greatly expanded access to public higher education. The second Morrill Act of 1890 strengthened this framework by authorizing the withholding of federal funds from land-grant colleges that denied admission on the basis of race, unless states established separate institutions for minority students (Drury, 2003).

Conclusion

Grundtvig's vision of education, which inspired the creation of folk high schools, was rooted in a rejection of traditional schooling for its rote methods, lifeless curricula, and suppression of imagination and civic engagement. In contrast, he advocated for "Schools for Life" centered on the living word, communal living, and lifelong learning grounded in dialogue, shared experience, and social cohesion.

All the institutions discussed in this essay form part of a shared ecosystem of popular educational initiatives dedicated to democratizing knowledge and fostering civic participation which maintain connections to other important community-based initiatives in the United States and around the world.

Far from representing declining models, they continue to evolve, reflecting the enduring relevance of Grundtvig's vision and legacy. Yet a pressing question emerges for future inquiry: will folk high schools and related institutions adapt to a coming age increasingly shaped by intelligent technologies as successfully as they have responded to past societal changes?

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