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Tensions in the meeting between institutional logics and identities in Swedish folk high schools

Caroline Runesdotter*

Abstract
Swedish folk high schools previously held an autonomous position with their own courses, specially trained teachers and the teachers' association. With the introduction of market-like structures in adult education a variety of providers including folk high schools have become involved in the competition for public and private educational commissions. This article focuses on the tensions at folk high schools when perceived dependence on income from competitive commissions results in new practices that challenge existing institutional values. The impact of the changed conditions is experienced differently, although interviews with staff at different folk high schools indicate a growing gulf not only between the leadership and the teachers, but also between the new practice and what was traditionally considered to be the core values of folk high schools.

Keywords: public sector reforms, institutional change, marketisation, folk high schools

Introduction
Standing outside the public school system and compulsory education, folk high schools depend on their reputation and legitimacy in order to obtain both public funding and students. Since the early 1990s, reduced public funding and the need for external incomes have led to a market orientation whereby folk high schools compete with other providers for courses on demand, resulting in new practices that affect both relations and activities in those schools.

The Nordic Folk High Schools represent a locally rooted type of school and were the first to offer education for adults. In Sweden the first folk high schools were established by wealthy farmers in the second half of the 19th century with the purpose of providing both general and civic education. The farmers’ aim was to foster their sons to become modern farmers who were also able to defend their political interests (Tengberg, 1968; Simon, 1989). The founders were eager to keep the autonomy of the schools, and managed this to some degree. Despite the fact that they soon became dependent on financial support from the state as well as from the county and municipality, folk high schools were never restricted by a national curriculum (Swensson, 1968).
Today, the 150 folk high schools in Sweden have different forms of ownership: the majority are owned by popular movements, some by foundations and a third by county councils and municipalities. They also represent different ideological traditions, such as temperance movements, free church and working class movements. In spite of their diversity, folk high schools have a common identity formed around the traditions of civic education and co-operative and participative forms of education (Paldanius & Alm 2009; SOU 1996:75). Traditionally, the teachers and the teachers’ association have had a strong position and played an important role in the development of folk high schools (Bogärde, 1974; Mustel, 2002).

Throughout history, folk high schools have played different roles in relation to the school system. As long as access to upper secondary education was limited, folk high schools prepared for higher education, like nursing schools and teacher training colleges (Landström 2004). Different school reforms during the 1960s incrementally reduced the limitations of the school system, and this impacted on folk high schools. Up until then, folk high schools had been boarding schools in the countryside but since the 1970s the majority of new folk high schools have been established in suburbs and offered education for people with a low standard of education (Runesdotter, 2010).

Simultaneously with an educational reform concerning compulsory schools, the Government Bill about Liberal Adult Education (1990/1991:82) imposed a new way of governing with the effect that public funding was considerably reduced. The need for additional funds paved the way for activities that could generate external incomes. As adult education continued to be reformed during the late 1990s conditions were introduced that resembled the idea of the market (e.g. Lumsden Wass, 2004, Henning-Loeb, 2006). Since competition between various providers was supposed to enhance quality, folk high schools as well as study associations were invited to compete in order to offer courses for adults. These externally financed courses have improved the economic circumstances of some folk high schools, but this development has also been accompanied by new practices concerning employment conditions for teachers and the admission of students.

**Folk high schools as constituting an organisational field**

The empirical data consist of semi-structured interviews with principals, economic assistants, teachers and members of school boards in a sample of eight different schools and representatives of the teachers’ association. The interviews were carried out in 2005 and 2008 in connection with a project funded by the Swedish Research Council, *Transforming incentives in Swedish Adult Education*. The selection of folk high schools was guided by the ambition to obtain the widest possible variety of owners (popular movements or municipalities) and locations (countryside or in proximity to cities).

In spite of their diversity, folk high schools assert their specific identity which has evolved over time. In order to understand the impact of the links between folk high
schools and what is held as a common history and identity, I have applied the concept of *organisational fields* (Powell & DiMaggio, 1983). Within an organisational field, legitimacy is enhanced by institutionalised common characteristics like rules, rituals and traditions. That which becomes institutionalised is that which is supported within the group or the surrounding society (Czarniawska & Wolff, 1998). Institutionalisation is a source of resistance to quick changes. For rules, rituals and traditions to be subject to institutionalisation it is not enough that they be embraced by single schools, they must be accepted by the majority, the collective of, in this case, folk high schools. Further, what is institutionalised is often viewed as the only alternative, becoming taken for granted. DiMaggio and Powell assert that “Institutions do not only constrain options: they establish the very criteria by which people discover their preferences” (1991:11).

Over time, organisations within a field develop an institutional logic that can be defined as “a set of material practices and symbolic constructions which constitutes its organizing principles” (Friedland & Alford 1991:248). These can consist in both patterns of behaviour and taken-as-given understandings about how to perform activities. Within the group of folk high schools, institutionalisation has been an ongoing process. Some main characteristics have remained while others have changed through history since institutionalisation is a continuing process of adjusting to changes in society. What is institutionalised is manifested in rules, traditions and institutional myths. In the case of folk high schools, these are referred to as “folk high school spirit” that includes, for instance, a respectful and personal relationship with the students and a variety of teaching methods (e.g. Arvidson, 1988; Höghielm 1992; Paldanius & Alm, 2009). However vague the folk high school spirit may be, in the sense that it is an example of traditions and manners maintained as a product of history, it is an important part of a common, institutional identity. That which is preserved obtains acceptance in a group or society, and there will always be some kind of resistance to quick changes and, when a taken-for-granted institutional identity within a field is changed, it normally does not take place without contradictions and conflicts (Scott, 2008).

**Public sector reforms affecting folk high schools**

Reductions in public funding for folk high schools started in the late 1970s and continued during the 1980s. When these schools were permitted to pursue commissioned education programmes in 1986 this represented a shift from the earlier public funding that both implied secure funding and control of courses as well as student numbers. The growth of commissions was slow during the first years, but now represents a considerable share of the incomes at some folk high schools (SOU2003:125). Although competitive commissions make up a relatively small part of folk high schools’ budgets, they are also one of the few elements that schools can seek to influence. This can explain why competing for commissions is becoming disproportionately important for such schools.
The Government Bill (Bill 1990/91:82) transferred the authority for folk high schools to a non-governmental board directed by representatives of the owners. The reform represented a shift from strong state regulation to governance through self-regulation at the local level in accordance with objectives and results. The teachers’ association that until then had a considerable influence through the governmental authority was not represented in the new board and was henceforth left without a formal influence (Mustel, 2002).

The decision to change the authority for folk high schools also impacted upon the internal relations at the schools. One intention of the Government Bill (Bill 1990/91:82) was to transfer power from teachers to those directing the schools, i.e. school boards and principals. In the new regulations the decree about teacher influence disappeared (SFS 1991:977). The relations of teachers among themselves and with principals were affected when the system of central negotiations was abolished and local as well as individual negotiations were introduced.

Different governmental initiatives to offer education to the unemployed increased the volume of short-term education commissions in adult education as well as among folk high schools. The Government Bill (1995/96:222), called the Adult Education Initiative, aimed to transform adult education not only in order to provide education to the high number of unemployed but also to correspond to the needs of a changing society. In the search for flexible forms for education one idea was to abolish the municipal monopoly in adult education, and open up for competition with the intention that quality would be raised through competition (Lumsden Wass, 2004). The Adult Education Initiative led to a 50 percent increase in the number of students at folk high schools, from approximately 20,000 to 30,000 a year over five years. Consequently, when it came to an end the necessary adjustments were painful at many folk high schools that had acquired budget deficits.

**General characteristics of public sector reforms**

In many ways the changes that affected the folk high schools are in line with the changes that took place in the public sector in general. Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson (2000) argue that the public sector reforms in different European countries followed similar patterns of public sector restructuring. They considered the reforms as attempts to change different public entities in order to more closely resemble the idea of complete organisations. Put differently, they interpreted many public sector reforms as attempts to construct organisations. The intention was to change the way to manage, control and account for activities, not to control products or services. Decisive steps were to transfer responsibility and accountability to different units, strengthen hierarchy and transfer disciplinary means to those directing (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000).

In addition, the way of defining environments and borders has been affected. In order to define costs, assets and results for the newly regarded organisations, categories
such as customers or competitors are applied instead of colleagues, students or patients (Forssell & Jansson, 1996). Being considered as organisations rather than schools or hospitals has also opened up new ways to appoint leaders. The lack of private sector experience has been treated as a problem and experience of managing organisations in general has been more highly esteemed than experience from the specific field or activity in question (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000).

These changes concern folk high schools in a couple of ways. First, the reformulation of folk high schools’ relations with their environment has had the peculiar effect that the schools’ customers are not considered to be students, but rather the public or private entities, organisations or companies that purchase services, in this case education. The students are sometimes renamed participants – but not considered as customers. Second, connected to the development sketched by Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson (2000) is the recruitment of directors, principals and board members from outside the circles of folk high schools or study associations. Instead of experience in education provision, management experience has often been prioritised (Mustel, 2009).

**Evaluations of the changed practices at folk high schools**

Since the introduction of the new governing principles there have been evaluations at the national level by specially appointed Inquiry Chairs, the most recent in the 2002–2004 period. Further, an evaluation of the effects of the new ways of directing and controlling the folk high schools was performed by the National Audit Office (Riksrevisionsverket) in 1999. Their interviews and inquiries with principals showed that the economy played a superior role and that all questions concerning external incomes were focused on (1999 p. 93). One reflection in the report was that “the role of the principal has been transformed from being a pedagogue or ideologist to being a business executive and that was not considered to promote quality” (Riksrevisionsverket, 1999 p. 62).

What was also observed by the National Audit Office was a growing disagreement between rhetoric and practice (Riksrevisionsverket 1999 p. 51). The National Audit Office concluded that ideological aspects and core values had a limited significance compared to the consideration to market or economic efficiency (Riksrevisionsverket, 1999 p. 97).

In the second national evaluation of folk high schools, the governmental Inquiry Chair (SOU 2003:125) also came to similar conclusions. In one of its reports the economic situations at the schools were scrutinised. It revealed that in 1999–2000, for the first time in history, there had been a deficit among the folk high schools as a whole, meaning that the overall expenses exceeded the overall incomes and funding. Surprisingly, this took place during the period of the large-scale, government-financed Adult Education Initiative. The report showed how feeble the economy was for many schools. It revealed the harsh conditions caused by reduced funding and, as the report concluded, a failure by the schools to identify and adjust to the changed conditions
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(SOU 2003:125). Although some adjustments had taken place and affected the size of classes, teachers’ workloads and the maintenance of school equipment and buildings, it was obvious, the Inquiry Chair stated, that the economic situation had forced some folk high schools to become engaged in activities that were, if not alien, at least peripheral to the idea of the folk high school.

The leadership of schools

One intention of the Government Bill (Bill 1990/91:82) was that the schools should be directed by the principals and boards – not by the teachers’ assemblies. As one principal declared, a task for both the board and principals has been to reduce the power of the teachers. In order to facilitate the authority of the principal, those appointed have preferably been external persons, in contrast to the previous practice that the best educated and most experienced teacher should be appointed. When asked, the representative of the teachers’ association connected the recent problems with the ways new principals were being recruited:

... if you generalise, one can say that some of the principals, that come from totally different sectors, tend to behave more like traditional business executives and are inclined to point with the whole hand in a way that teachers at folk high schools not are comfortable with. Instead they are used to, as a collective, having a considerable influence on the activities performed (Secretary at the Teachers’ Association 2005).

The expectations of the principals have often been contradictory; on one hand, they are expected to stabilise and hopefully expand the economic situation of the school. On the other, they are expected to be an ideological and pedagogical leader. When those appointed have in many cases been people without folk high school experience, they have faced difficulties obtaining legitimacy among teachers. Some have met with resistance, especially as in some cases they have had a more or less explicit mission to depose the teachers’ assembly, as one of the interviewed principals said:

Many of those that are employed as principals nowadays have a certain mission from the board: get a new agreement on working hours, introduce individual salaries and reduce the influence of the teachers’ board (Principal 2008).

In many schools, workforce reductions were the solution to do away with a growing deficit. One interviewed principal who had been forced to dismiss many teachers confessed she had to make a clear separation between what were emotions and what was the legal point of view. She had been working as a principal for many years, but until recently had not been forced to familiarise herself with the labour legislation (interviewed 2008). Her experiences are not unique and at many folk high schools the leadership seemed to be concerned about the problem of having teachers permanently employed when a considerable part of the activities were temporary educational pro-
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jects. It has led the schools to carefully consider who to employ and under what conditions, as an employee responsible for economic affairs at a folk high school explained:

The greatest expense is wages and that’s why you need to have staff that are flexible and you can use, and that are not stuck in permanent employment. Rather, they should be employed for a limited period, in order to avoid having to pay wages during half a year for a project that wasn’t extended. /.../ We must be prepared to have staff that we can quickly get rid of (Economic assistant, 2005).

But the situation at the folk high schools has also affected the position of the principals. Five of the eight principals in my sample had been appointed in order to replace a principal who had left prematurely. Although not representative, it corresponds to the trend at the national level. The number of principals who have been relieved of their post has escalated since the beginning of the 1990s and this has recently led to an initiative of the trade union (i.e. the teachers’ association) to investigate the reasons for principals leaving (Mustel, 2009). In the 2003–2009 period, 133 principals left their employment. This is a high number if we compare it with the total number of folk high schools: 150. Some schools experienced repeated changes of principals. Behind the numbers there were different reasons to leave the schools – some were dismissed, some on sick leave and others left their employment on their own initiative (Mustel, 2009).

The high turnover of principals can be seen as symptomatic of the contradictory challenges facing folk high schools – to keep a clear and distinctive profile and at the same time to maintain a stable economic situation, while also needing to have staff who are dedicated and flexible and prepared to leave the school when necessary. Mustel’s explanations of the high turnover of principals point to the unrealistic expectations of what is possible to achieve as a principal. In the interviews some of the new principals declared they had expected to “change and modernise the school, develop and renew the pedagogy or be in the direction of a school with an ideological profile” they found themselves carrying through saving campaigns and chasing after new incomes for the school (Mustel, 2009 p. 4). A principal at one folk high school in my sample explained what this meant:

I read a lot, many papers and watch the news and things like that. I have to interpret the market. /.../ it takes a long time and requires, so to say, a certain competence. If you don’t like it you can quit. Some schools went in for conference establishments and a spa. For me, it’s a question of what is most convenient for the folk high school. An average time for principals to stay is 2.5 years. Their position is not safe any more (Principal, 2005).

Principals without former folk high school experience encountered difficulties obtaining legitimacy among the teachers when they wanted to implement changes. The conflicts which erupted when they tried to cancel existing working hours agreements was a frequent reason for principals to leave, according to Mustel (2009). The fact that principals are leaving at a rate never experienced before can be seen as a symptom of the problems in the schools.
**The folk high school teachers**

The economic situation of the folk high schools also affects teachers by putting their employment at risk. How do they react when the economic situation of their schools is uncertain? What kind of responsibility can one expect from them by way of supporting their schools? One of the teachers interviewed was also a representative of the teachers’ association and referred to a discussion at one of their meetings about what kind of loyalty they were obliged to show their employers:

> Can we support that some folk high schools shall be closed down? That also means that our colleagues and members in the association will be unemployed. If they can’t finance the education, how can the schools continue? There is no real answer to that question, but it is a problem (Teacher, 2005).

At some folk high schools in my sample there were attempts to involve the teachers in the schools’ economic affairs. For example, budget management for courses could be delegated to the courses’ teachers. In some schools teachers were involved in tendering for courses that could generate external incomes. The efforts to assure the teachers’ employment were also a valid argument for the principals. As one interviewee declared, “if you feel that some of our activities are at risk, you will be more keen to discuss how to protect us /.../ we were all very conscious of why we did it, we were looking for alternative ways to retain staff”.

**The folk high school students**

With the economic situation as the central concern, students represent incomes or costs for the school. A person who fails to complete a course can mean a lost income for the school. Further, if he or she needs special support this can involve high costs for which the school risks not being compensated. These are conditions that affect the economic situation of the school, and both teachers and principals are aware of this. One way to transfer responsibility to the teachers is to make them responsible for both the recruitment and admission of students. But having the economics of the school as a constant, the central concern affects how teachers consider course applicants, namely whether or not they are economically desirable enough to be admitted to study:

> If you think this may be a person that will cause us problems, you will avoid those you think will cause problems or those that most likely will interrupt their studies (Teacher, 2005).

When the size of a school’s student body decreases along with the number of applicants for future courses, this can quickly affect the number of employees at the school, and this tends to encourage the feeling that everyone is in the same boat, that everyone has common interests:

> In this case for the teachers, it is a question of coming to an agreement as best one can. But here we do everything together, that means there are very few contradictory interests among
the employer and employees. I mean, we have no conflicting interests, we have one interest in common (Principal, 2005).

Although similar opinions were expressed by both teachers and principals, it was also obvious that their interests conflicted in at least one way. A teacher reported that, together with their colleagues, they felt they needed to bring money into the school: “as teachers it just feels like we are costing money”. Occasionally this has been felt a quite a tough demand: “particularly this requirement that we must generate income”. This teacher thinks that the administration at the school has to become more transparent, “…and in a way, we have needed to be involved and influence”. But he also thinks that a lot depends on the leadership and their attitude. It is possible to use the present structures in a way which makes it easy to bulldoze over teachers.

**The identity of the folk high schools and as a folk high school**

Organisations tend to adhere to institutional rules and myths. The legitimacy of an organisation is built on the reputation of its activities and ideology plays a crucial role in enhancing legitimacy (Berg & Jonsson, 1991). An organisation enjoys legitimacy as confirmation that its aims and activities have a justification in wider circles. But legitimacy is always at risk as it is not “a commodity to be possessed or exchanged, but rather a condition reflecting perceived consonance with relevant rules and laws, normative support, or alignment with cultural-cognitive frameworks” (Scott, 2008 p. 59).

During my interviews at the different folk high schools I gained the impression that ideological considerations were a low priority, if they even existed at all. At one school, the teacher representative regretted the lack of discussion and said that it partly depended on the retirement of certain colleagues:

The ideological discussions disappeared when the ideologists at the school retired. With them, the discussions also disappeared. But it is also a consequence of the new conditions for work at the school. I name it “new conditions” because you can’t point out how and when they were introduced, but we work with a pistol pointed at our heads and all are conscious that the situation is frail and can easily change in the wrong direction. So that’s what we are discussing today instead of ideology (Teacher, 2005).

A general impression is that many of the leading ideologists have now retired and that there seems to be a lack of live debate about the objectives. But against this backdrop, I met teachers who were concerned about the absence of ideological debate and stressed the need to ideologically motivate the allocation of public funding for the schools.

**Resistance to institutional change**

The high turnover of principals can partly be considered a result of resistance by teachers when they challenge taken-for-granted assumptions and try to impose a new institutional logic.
In my interviews with the teachers, I witnessed insecurity, a preoccupation with economic considerations that had little to do with education, and also something which I interpreted as a reaction of resistance. For example, teachers at one school were not consulted about the appointment of their new principal and the teacher I interviewed was upset about not having any influence on the decision. But, in contrast, at another school the leadership had to take the wishes of the teachers into consideration when appointing a new principal because the teachers would not accept anyone else.

Another example of resistance to change had to do with the introduction of a new pay structure for folk high schools. When the rigid system of centrally negotiated salaries was replaced by a system in which teachers negotiated their salaries on an individual basis with their principals, the principals gained a position of enhanced authority. It also had the effect to divide the teachers. But where teachers were invited to design pay structures differences in salaries were diminished instead of increased compared to the prior, centrally negotiated wage system. At one school the principle even went so far as to introduce the same salary for all, in accordance with the wishes of the teachers. In addition, the disappearance of ideological discussions were attended to at one school where they started organised studies of the history and ideas of folk high schools as a defensive action of the position as an alternative to traditional formal education.

**Concluding remarks**

The idiosyncratic institutional logic that has evolved over time in folk high schools has contributed to legitimating their activities. Having developed around certain, predictable conditions regarding public funding, this logic has become challenged by other rationalities centred around economic efficiency. Since the leadership of the folk high school is supposed to be able to adjust the supply of education according to fluctuations in demand, i.e. according to the market, new practices have been applied. In this case, when a logic formed by market principles has been imposed and coexisted with another, in many ways contradictory logic, dilemmas and tensions have emerged. In a situation where the employment of colleagues is at risk, the whole staff can be united in efforts to attract more students which often implies an acceptance of the new practices. But when folk high schools deviate from their institutionally accepted identity, their legitimacy is at stake. Practices considered to contradict the existing institutional logic are in some cases met with resistance that can be interpreted as a way to protect values in what is perceived as their traditional institutional identity.
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