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Experiences of stigma among adult learners in second-chance education: A life-history approach

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Abstract

This article examines four life-histories from students who recently completed second-chance education at a Swedish folk high school, having previously left upper secondary school without full qualifications – an experience often associated with academic failure. Through their studies, they have now gained eligibility for further education. Their narratives – shaped by different explanations for their earlier difficulties – are analysed using Erving Goffman's concept of stigma. The study highlights the varied ways individuals navigate school failure and departure from dominant educational norms. At the same time, their stories reflect pride in having forged alternative paths, particularly through labour market experiences. Using an educational life-history approach, the article explores how participants relate to their past school failure – retrospectively, in the present, and with regard to their futures. Particular attention is paid to how stigma tied to compulsory school failure influence their educational trajectories and how they position themselves as students.

Keywords: adult education, academic failure, second-chance education, stigma, life-history

Introduction

Academic failure

Academic failure can have significant consequences; education can open doors to career opportunities. Particularly higher education often provides individuals with the means to enjoy socioeconomic advantages in western capitalist societies (Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011). The social exclusion that can result from school failure may create lasting ripple

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effects – a risk factor for social exclusion later in life is precisely having experienced social exclusion at a younger age (Nilsen et al., 2022). Similarly, a lack of educational attainment can create conditions for poverty, which in turn perpetuates the same conditions for subsequent generations, even in a welfare state where equalising measures have been implemented (Brea-Martinez et al., 2023). Overall, researchers have found that a low level of education can be linked to a wide range of outcomes, from an increased likelihood of dying in accidents such as falls in old age (Ahmad Kiadaliri et al., 2018) to a reluctance to participate in cancer screenings (Altová et al., 2024).

Reasons for not completing high school can be ascribed to the individual, parents, schools, or educational policies (Gustafsson et al., 2016). It has been argued that contemporary western societies increasingly shift the responsibility for educational success onto individuals rather than institutions (Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2013). Within this view, failure is seen as a personal shortcoming rather than a structural issue. Individuals are held accountable for their performance, choices, and ability to navigate the system. Studies from Sweden – the context of this article – suggest that the burden on individuals to uphold high academic expectations and goals, as well as the pressure to make themselves successful, contribute to increased school stress (Högberg, 2024). Those who fail risk being perceived as careless, irresponsible, or incapable. Some students may, early on, discern that school may not offer genuine equal opportunities. In research some go as far as to claim that education has been transformed into a tool to instil acceptance of marginalisation (Sernhede, 2011).

Pertinent to the question at hand might also be the so called 'relevant adults' – the people who surround the young person both within and outside their family. For some graduating from high school may not appear to be a sufficiently attractive option to be worth the effort. This can occur if, in their environment, they observe adults who have pursued extensive education but are nonetheless unable to support themselves (Gustafsson et al., 2016). Examples include stories of non-traditional students who have achieved higher education yet continue to face challenges in becoming employable (Bron & Thunborg, 2020). Presumably, the opposite might also hold true – observing adults who are successful and self-supporting despite not having pursued long education could serve as evidence for the perceived unimportance of attaining higher education. It is possible that early school leaving itself may not be the sole cause of the well-documented greater risk of developing health, social, and financial problems. In a Scandinavian context, however, young people who remain unemployed or outside of education for two years face a significant risk of becoming permanently unemployed and marginalised (Cederberg & Hartsmar, 2013).

Early school leaving, often explained through socio-economic factors (Newcomb et al., 2002) also involves emotional-relational dimensions. Authoritarian teaching and lack of conflict resolution may contribute to alienation and dropout, alongside mental health challenges (Downes, 2018). Peer victimisation is another risk factor linked to non-completion of high school (Frick et al., 2024; Siebecke, 2024), whereas supportive teachers and learning environments have been shown to strengthen academic well-being (Siebecke, 2024). Educational aspirations – shaped by parents or the individual – are associated with achievement and access to future opportunities (Hammarström, 1996). Parental involvement also reduces the likelihood of dropout (Parr & Bonitz, 2015). In the context of adult education, where school leavers often return, inclusive social networks have proven important for persistence; their absence can significantly undermine engagement (Tacchi et al., 2023).

In Sweden the correlation between academic failure and alcohol-related issues, mental health problems, as well as with suicidal tendencies, is becoming increasingly

apparent (Högberg et al., 2024). As of 2023, approximately 20% of students in Swedish high school (upper secondary school) graduate without attaining a complete degree (Skolverket, 2023). This statistic underscores a significant challenge within the Swedish educational system, highlighting issues such as academic underachievement, disengagement, and disparities in educational outcomes. A school system that systematically fails a fifth of its students, risks perpetuating cycles of exclusion, limiting opportunities for social mobility, and diminishing the societal belief in education as a meaningful and attainable goal.

In a society where lifelong learning is the norm, the ability to learn becomes a defining trait of the successful and sensible individual (Andersson & Bergstedt, 1996; World Economic Forum, 2018). Those who struggle in school, particularly those who fail to obtain a complete secondary education, may therefore be seen as deficient – deviating from the expected trajectory. And deviation, in turn, carries stigma (Goffman, 1963/1986). While the reasons for not completing upper secondary education vary, what unites those who leave without full qualifications is, in some sense, the experience of educational failure. However, their responses to this failure differ. Some disengage from formal education altogether, entering or making attempts to enter the labour market where learning takes place in other ways. Others, at some point, return to education through what is commonly referred to as 'second-chance education', which is the context of this study.

The structure of such institutions varies across national contexts. In Sweden, two primary pathways for second-chance education stand out: a) municipal adult education (MAE) and b) folk high schools. This article focuses on young adults who return to education through folk high schools in pursuit of qualifications for higher education. Using an educational life-history approach it examines how they relate to their past educational failure and how they perceive themselves as students – retrospectively, in the present, and looking ahead. In particular, it explores the stigma they may experience as a result of having failed within the compulsory school system.

The folk high school

Across the Nordic countries, folk high schools provide voluntary, grade- and tuition-free education to any adult learner. In Sweden alone, there are more than 150 publicly funded folk high schools, which offer both 'second-chance' education, comparable to upper-secondary qualification, and specialised courses ranging from introductory levels to prestigious, advanced programmes (Hallqvist et al., 2020).

In Sweden, folk high schools often serve as a second chance for those who have struggled with or rejected traditional education. Participants may include individuals who view education as enforcement rather than opportunity (Nylander et al., 2020). The folk high school is oftentimes described as an adaptable institution, in that it is and has been ready to cater to societal demands (Andersén, 2011). The folk high school has been described as the 'super nanny' of the Swedish educational system, in that it has a compensatory role (Nylander et al., 2020). Yet being rooted in *Bildung*-ideals it is not always evident that the folk high school should work solely as a second-chance school or as a back-up plan for the people that struggle in ordinary school. It has been argued that tensions exist between viewing the folk high school as a stepping stone to further studies and as a place offering education for life in its own right (Berndtsson, 2000).

The folk high school can also be seen in the light of *lifelong learning* in that it is not just aiming to correct or supplement degrees – it is also a springboard for further education and for attaining a sustainable relationship to education and learning. It can be said to

have motivational purposes, and it has been noted that there has been a shift from empowering objectives towards a focus on those not succeeding in comprehensive education (Bernhard & Andersson, 2017).

In addition, the folk high school has increasingly been catering to people with disabilities in recent years, with around 30-35% of its second-chance program now consisting of individuals with disabilities (Nylander et al., 2020). Folk high schools have been shown to support participants with neuropsychiatric disabilities and mental health issues (Hugo et al., 2019; Hugo & Hedegaard, 2022). They may also function in an institutionalising way, offering an environment and accommodations that make it difficult for some students to transition elsewhere (Hugo et al., 2019), and have been portrayed as both adaptable and compensatory (Andersén, 2011). Consequently, the folk high school houses a multitude of mentalities towards learning, within their group of students, yet; the reasons for studying on the second chance program at a folk high school are primarily to get one's qualifications in order.

Conceptual framework: Goffman – stigma

To understand how people carrying academic failures present themselves, this article draws on Goffman's (1963/1986) concept of stigma – seen as a process where traits deemed undesirable, such as skin colour, impairments, or queer identities, lead to exclusion (Shulman, 2017; Dillon, 2020). The focus herein is on young adults who have completed second-chance education at a Swedish folk high school, and how they relate to learning, studenthood, and education. As noted by Field et al. (2012):

> [t]he experience of studenthood can pose basic questions of who a person is, who they have been, and who they wish to become. This in turn may provoke intense anxiety about one's ability to cope with change, or about whether a person is good enough in the eyes of significant people, whether fellow students or lectures; or conversely, it may provoke excessive (and often ill-founded) confidence about these things. (Field et al., 2012, p. 82)

In the case of students on the second-chance course of the folk high school many of them have struggled in compulsory school and high school. Their stories incorporate a from-the-outside perspective, describing themselves as has having failed or being 'fuckups', harbouring ideas about what others as well as society think of them. Their stories reflect an awareness of how they are perceived by others. As Andersén (2011) points out, folk high school students may be viewed as 'second-class students,' marked by earlier failure.

According to Goffman (1963/1986), biography takes shape in interaction with others. Our past actions influence what is expected of us, and the present is often filtered through the past – making certain labels hard to shake:

> [p]ersonal identity, then, has to do with the assumption that the individual can be differentiated from all others and that around this means of differentiation a single continuous record of social facts can be attached, entangled, like candy floss, becoming then the sticky substance to which still other biographical facts can be attached. (Goffman, 1963/1986, p. 57)

The implications for someone having 'failed in school' may, in this explanatory model, be that stigma is attached to the person having failed school – an internalisation process may have them doubt their capabilities for studying. As Goffman (1963/1986) states: 'biography attached to documented identity can place clear limitations on the way in which an individual can elect to present himself […]' (p. 61).

Goffman argues that biography is often thought of as coherent – that individuals carry with them one single biography (Goffman, 1963/1986). To reinvent oneself, to forge new paths, can therefore be seen as disruptive or even provocative acts. To come across as fragmented is seen as suspicious. Connected to this mode of being is a certain hesitation and doubt – in short, an ambivalent stance toward existence and the choices one must make within it. Zygmunt Bauman, in a discussion revolving around stigma, writes that '[a]t best, uncertainty is confusing and felt as discomforting. At worst, it carries a sense of danger' (Bauman, 1991, p. 56). Ambivalence, then, can be understood as something that unsettles – in hesitation, there is a latent potential to deviate, to move outside expected frames of action.

The one who hesitates may be perceived as unpredictable – someone who does not immediately conform to established rhythms and expectations. In an economic sense, hesitation entails a temporal disruption, as it introduces delays in decision-making and action, which, in systems structured around efficiency and productivity, may be perceived as costly. Ergo: the failed students' stigma may spring from perceptions of being a societal burden – a cost.

In the life stories presented here, stigma helps illuminate life choices. As Goffman describes, stigma can harm individuals, but it also functions as a social force that motivates action. It regulates behaviour by making the stigmatised position uncomfortable, prompting attempts to escape it. Yet stigma also constrains action, especially among those lacking resources or recognition, and may instead lead to frustration, which can turn into violence – against society, oneself, or both (Sernhede, 2011).

While internalising stereotypes can serve as a coping strategy, stigma may also become a source of pride, prompting individuals to reject negative treatment (Shulman, 2017). Stigmatisation serves as a mechanism of social control: it marginalises those who deviate from norms, while also offering conditional reintegration to those who conform. Both exclusion and the possibility of redemption work to reinforce dominant expectations (Shulman, 2017).

Stigma has been used in academic contexts to illustrate the consequences for individuals positioned outside normative frameworks (Costa et al., 2020; McWilliams, 2017). It operates on both macro and micro levels – through institutional structures, societal discourses, peer pressure, parental expectations, and personal internalisation. The concept has been applied in studies on minority students navigating dominant educational norms (Turgut & Çelik, 2022), and on peer regulation in digital spaces (Vanherle et al., 2023). Related dynamics are also seen in research on students in state care, where internalised school failure contributes to feelings of educational unfitness (Hugo, 2013). Within folk high schools, stigma has been examined in relation to supportive pedagogical environments that may foster recovery and self-worth (Hedegaard & Hugo, 2022). Scholars have also argued for addressing stigma explicitly within educational pedagogy to confront discrimination (Sernhede, 2011)

Furthermore, stigma can be tied to a prevailing paradigm centered on self-fulfillment – those who fail to realise their potential are pathologised. Within the discourse on the widespread mental health crisis among young people, scholars have linked this phenomenon to the shifting burden of responsibility from society to the individual (Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2013).

In relation to this study, pathologisation can be seen as either a precursor to or closely intertwined with stigmatisation. In the past, when access to higher education was reserved for those deemed suitable, the responsibility largely rested with institutions that made these determinations. Under today's neoliberal paradigm, however, the responsibility

increasingly falls on the individual. If failure occurs, it is framed as a result of personal missteps – wrong choices, poor conduct, or a failure to handle the responsibility that society has entrusted to them (Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2013; Han, 2017). Consequently: the individual must bear the consequences, regardless of whether their struggles could have been avoided or were shaped by factors such as reading and writing difficulties, dyslexia, attention disorders, socioeconomic hardships, or relational challenges, etc.

Method

This study employs a biographical approach drawing on research conducted within the field of education and in particular adult education. Biographical methods in educational research offer an approach to understanding individuals' educational experiences within broader social contexts (Roberts, 2002; Bainbridge et al., 2021; Formenti & West, 2021). This tradition stresses the importance of capturing the complexities of individuals' life trajectories, including their personal narratives, cultural backgrounds, and socio-economic circumstances, to illuminate the complex nature of learning and development (Merrill & West, 2009). Life narratives are shaped by broader cultural and historical contexts, biographies reflect the values of the time in which they are told (Roberts, 2002; West et al., 2007). Educational engagement can be understood as a dialectical process shaped by the tension between conformity and deviation. Departing from normative paths may result in stigma (Goffman, 1963/1986).

Although participants were asked to recount their educational journeys from preschool to adult education, they were free to move back and forth in memory and choose which parts to emphasise. It was stressed that their stories – however told – were valuable. As Atkinson (2007) puts it:

> The point of the life story interview is to give the person the opportunity to tell his or her story, the way he or she chooses to tell it, so we can learn from their voice, their words, and their subjective meaning of their experience of life. (Atkinson, 2007, p. 233)

Since the interview prompts reflection, biographical narratives are often, as Evans (2013) notes, attempts at coherence and evolving accounts of motivation.

It is important to be aware of the unusual situation a life history interview may pose and how interviewees might adjust their story to resonate with the interviewer (Riessman, 1993; Roberts, 2002). As the interviews were processed and written out by the researcher it is correspondingly important to assert that the assembling of a story is part of the story. In this study four educational life history interviews were performed with four former students at the folk high school of which all four had attained qualification to higher education through their studies at the folk high school. The interviews with additional follow-ups took place between autumn 2023 and spring 2024. The follow-up process involved participants meeting in person with me to review the drafts of their stories. During these sessions, they had the opportunity to make adjustments, remove misunderstood parts, add or correct details. Additionally, I contacted participants by phone or email if further information was needed after the in-person meetings.

The data was provided by two men and two women between the ages of 20 and 25, interviews spanning 56-138 minutes. Although the initial interviews were conducted in an open-ended manner, there was also an effort to establish a narrative structure – a sequence of events that could serve as a foundation for the follow-up dialogue. As the process unfolded, it became evident that some participants spoke freely and expansively, while others expressed themselves more succinctly.

This raised a methodological question: are only highly talkative individuals suitable for biographical research? I decided against such an exclusion criterion, as it risks rendering stories invisible. Moreover, it could exclude those who may not feel entitled to speak – a group that, theoretically, might include individuals who are more cautious in their wording, face certain language challenges, or simply lack the inclination to elaborate on certain aspects of their lives. Accordingly, each interviewee had to be met on their own terms, and each interview thus generated different types of follow-up work. The interviews were designed to explore participants' educational journeys, examining their motivations and challenges.

Interpretation of collected data

Given that four life stories were to be analysed within the scope of an article, it became logical to take a cross-sectional approach, focusing on what the participants chose to highlight – where they placed emphasis and which parts of their lives they deemed important to narrate and explain. This consideration guided the process of identifying the categories used to structure and analyse their stories.

Thematic analysis was used to examine the life history interviews, focusing on participants' experiences at the folk high school as well as their broader educational trajectories. The process involved immersion in the biographical material – relistening, rereading, and involving other researchers – to identify central ideas (Merrill & West, 2009). This approach 'involves a rigorous attention to generate patterns' (Roberts, 2002), and decisions about what to include were guided by the research aims (Merrill & West, 2009). Recurring themes and significant moments were identified across participants' narratives, spanning their earlier schooling and later engagement in second-chance education.

In analysing the material, it became clear that participants' stories often carried elements of defence – efforts to explain or justify their perceived deviation from a conventional path. Much of their narration aimed to make sense of experiences otherwise seen as failure or misconduct. This pattern pointed to the role of stigma, which became the guiding lens for analysis, focusing on continuity and discontinuity in their educational trajectories and how past experiences shaped perceptions, motivations, and challenges.

The narratives were often front-loaded, with more detailed accounts of recent events. While early and middle school experiences were less elaborated, they remained present as a latent backdrop. Although not directly asked why they had not completed high school, all participants addressed this, often explaining how their school years had gone astray.

Alongside justification, their stories expressed pride – often tied to work gained by stepping away from school. The folk high school emerged as a space for renegotiation, where fixed identities could be reconsidered and futures reflected upon. In the light of the aforementioned, I developed three themes from the collected interviews*: i) Stigmatisation from having failed school, ii) Work experience as a time for gaining perspective,* and *iii) The folk high school – an environment for revaluing.*

The analysis does not aim to claim authority over participants' narratives but offers possible interpretations. By exploring patterns and connections, it seeks to suggest insights that align with, rather than override, the meanings expressed by the participants. Outtakes from the life stories serve as representative examples. Although told partly non-chronologically, excerpts are presented in chronological order with the above-mentioned overarching categories as anchor points, for clarity.

Results

Stigmatisation from having failed school

To have failed in completing high school was for the respondents a cause for self-reproach. Although all of them had their own unique story and explanation for what prevented them from completing high school they had all to various degrees internalised a sense of downfall. Thomas (all names are pseudonyms) expressed having felt abnormal from an early age: 'I've felt all my life that there's something wrong with me. I can't do it. I can't handle this. Sitting still for as long as everyone else, how the hell can you do that? It's unbelievably dull.'

Thomas' frustration echoes findings that suggest disengagement is not merely about individual shortcomings but also about the rigid structures of schooling that fail to accommodate diverse needs and ways of learning. Thomas said that he felt 'like something crooked in something straight' and although he suspected that he was 'wrong' he has come to understand his attempts to adjust as futile, even expressing regret over having tried to fit in:

> So I don't understand why I cared about it so damn much, really. There's no point in struggling at that age, struggle when you become an adult instead. This is just crap, it should be fun here, that's what I'd say. And that's what I'll teach my children, I mean it's better if you have fun in high school because that's when you can have fun, because it sure as hell won't be fun later.

There is a duality in Thomas's story – on one hand, he initially made efforts to fit in and conform to expectations, but upon realising the personal stakes, he began to scrutinise the game instead of the player. Positioning himself as someone who struggled and failed he addresses not the failure but the struggle, turning the experience on its head. Using Goffman (1963/1986), it can be interpreted as a form of stigma-management. Goffman exemplifies with a girl with only one leg who, when confronted with sympathetic comments about having lost her leg, uses similar inverting techniques as she responds with irony: 'How careless of me!' (Goffman, 1963/1986, p. 136). Consequently, Thomas' account can be read as a variation on Aesop's 'The Fox and the Grapes' – dismissing what he cannot reach – yet unlike the fable's fox, Thomas offers a sharp critique of what he opted out of:

> A 100 years ago, people sat at school desks and listened to lectures. Back then, they rode horse-drawn carriages to school; now, you can practically take a helicopter to school if you have enough money, but you're still sitting at the same school desk with the same educational materials, you know?

Although he acknowledged that he did not fit the mould of traditional educational settings, calling himself a 'fuck-up', he has shifted his criticism from himself to school.

Another respondent employed similar modes of handling himself. Emil was from an early age not particularly interested in acquiring high grades. When choosing high school, he found it difficult: 'Should a fifteen-year-old boy, who has no idea who he is, be expected to decide who he wants to be the next day?' Emil continues his story, acting out the emotional turmoil he felt back then:

> It was like getting drafted into the military when that letter arrived. Do I even like this? My whole worldview was shaken. I don't even like hockey – do I want to work with kids? What is this? Who am I?

He decides to go for a Childcare and Recreation-program. Slowly but surely, he came to the realisation that it was not for him: 'I don't want to listen to all these courses about children. So I left. And that had never happened before.'. Not finishing high school, Emil explains, was seen as strange by those around him. Emil describes it as 'shaky' – not knowing why you are attending high school while it is viewed as so important and as the norm. Not completing high school was seen as 'strange' – people who did not finish high school were considered strange.

Emil's account aligns with Goffman's (1963/1986) stigma concept; deviating from the normative path of completing high school results in a socially discrediting mark, shaping how others perceive and interact with him. It also highlights how the inability to make clear and decisive choices creates unease and positions one outside normative behaviour – suggesting that hesitation itself can be stigmatising.

In due course, Emil came to the conclusion that 'life wasn't over just because you made the wrong choice, which was incredibly comforting to realise.' Emil describes that when he was done, life still lay ahead of him. Life would go on, and he could start working. Having not completed school became an itch for Emil, eventually propelling him to apply for second-chance education at a folk high school. Taking his qualifications (at the folk high school), and doing it relatively easily, was a way for Emil to prove to others that he could do it. Emil describes that by completing the qualifications, he said, quote: 'fuck you' to those who had looked down on him for not having completed high school: 'People kept asking if I wasn't going to finish high school, and it followed me until I finally decided, 'Just get the damn diploma and be done with it. Leave me alone.' In Emil's world, the stigma seems to lie in having closed a door (to higher education) rather than not having walked through it. Being eligible for higher education appears more important than actually using that eligibility – at least at the stage Emil is in.

Having difficulty engaging in studies for various reasons and falling behind became a stigma in itself. Already 'standing out' led one respondent, Susanna, who had struggled with mental health from an early age, to resist when the school initiated an ADHD assessment: 'I didn't want another reason for people to bully me,' she explained, indicating how the fear of further stigmatisation influenced her decisions.

For another respondent, Hiwa, dyslexia became a concerning factor. In this case it was a family member, namely Hiwa's mother, who objected to having her diagnosed:

> She just thought I was lazy. It's kind of a thing in Somali culture that a child doesn't have diagnoses. She didn't want me to get my diagnosis, but I had a very good Swedish teacher who supported me and said that it would be easier for me if I got my diagnosis. The teacher noticed that reading and writing were difficult and did some tests. But my mom didn't want us to do further tests, but my teacher did them anyway, and after that, she talked to my mom about how it would be easier for me if I got the diagnosis.

Returning to Susanna, she explains that she felt ashamed and inadequate for not completing high school, feeling like 'society's black sheep'. It was especially embarrassing to have to tell her family.

> You felt a bit ashamed. You felt bad, like you saw how everyone else your age, well, they finished high school, they went to prom, they went on student trips, and there was so much you felt like you missed because you were unwell and didn't stay in school. You felt so bad

> in comparison to everyone else, because they were somewhere I could never really catch up to.

When she dropped out, she gave a small farewell speech to her high school class – a speech she remembers was about how some people take highways while others have to find their own paths, and that she was now going to take one of those paths. That was easier said than done, as Susanna articulates: 'After I dropped out, I felt so bad that in my head, it was like I was locked in my room with the blinds down for several months.'

Not completing high school left many with a sense of failure. Thomas felt he never belonged and later blamed the system. Emil, overwhelmed by early expectations, returned to education to silence doubt, not chase ambition. Susanna avoided an ADHD diagnosis to escape stigma and withdrew after dropping out. Hiwa's dyslexia was ignored at home, and support came through one teacher – showing how help often depends on individuals rather than systems.

Work experience as a time for gaining perspective

All four respondents struggled in school, and several mentioned that their waning interest in education was influenced by exposure to the possibility of work. The work experience they all eventually gained affected them in different ways – starting to work felt liberating and rewarding, giving them a sense of capability. However, their work experiences also played a role in motivating them to explore other sectors of work and eventually return to education.

Emil started working during the time he was skipping school – a setup he describes as fairly common. He felt a bit like a 'juvenile delinquent', and his parents questioned his skipping. After a while, however, they realised that (Emil enacts his parents): 'he's just completely uninterested in this [school].' He explains that, in the end, his parents did not have much say in the matter. But his father did tell him that if he was going to skip school, he should at least do something productive – do not skip just for the sake of rebellion, was the advice. Emil expresses that if that was the case, he might as well start to earn some money. Emil's narrative puts forth a view on the labour market as an accessible place – almost a smorgasbord of possibilities – in stark contrast to how people struggling with school are usually portrayed, especially in research, as shown in this article's opening section.

He did not really think about the long-term consequences of skipping school. He focused on how great it would be when those three years of high school were over, so he would never have to study again. To Emil, starting work felt like beginning adulthood a little earlier. 'We're going to work for the rest of our lives anyway, so why not start now?', he says. He looked forward to trying out different jobs.

Shortly after high school, Emil moved to Stockholm – he had found love there and also got a job, which allowed him to spend more time on his music hobby. Once again, he could devote himself to music. Emil rhetorically asks himself, 'Emil, do you want to learn more? No, I want to do something on my own. I'll pack up and see what life is like.' In Stockholm, he tried various jobs, including working as a substitute teacher at a preschool. Some of the jobs, like stocking candy in candy stores, were looked down upon by others, as if it was a 'pretend job.' 'It didn't matter if I was happy with the job as long as society, or whatever you want to call it, didn't see it as something important.' On being a substitute teacher Emil says: 'Many people say being a substitute isn't a real job. So, if it wasn't a job, what was I doing there for eight hours a day? In that case, I had to find something else.'

Stocking candy, he actually found quite nice. He got to see Stockholm and meet interesting people. But explaining the job to others often led to raised eyebrows.

Another respondent, Hiwa, were also keen on making her way into the job market. When she skipped school in high school, she worked instead. 'It wasn't worth being in school, so I worked instead.' She worked in home care, and if anyone asked why she was not in school, she had ready answers. 'I just said, no, we have independent study today… so I got away with it.' It felt good for Hiwa to start earning her own money.

Thomas in turn worked in various jobs, ranging from car dealerships to the restaurant industry and healthcare centers. The positions he held were both permanent and temporary contracts, and Thomas says that it has always been easy for him to find and get a job. Even during high school, Thomas had started working. The connections he made back then helped him in his professional life even after finishing high school. He says he had '2-3 jobs to juggle, that I was trying to manage.' It felt meaningful and rewarding: 'You're doing something, plus you're getting something in return.' By going his own way Thomas found fulfilment on different levels: 'For me, it has always been a source of pride to stay true to myself.'

Thomas says that it is difficult to know what you truly want, especially when you are young or a young adult. That's why he is glad he did not make life decisions too early but instead gave himself time to get to know himself. "Because, after all, it's your life we're talking about – I mean, you can't just waste it.'

Although Thomas enjoyed his job as a car tester, which was his last job before starting his studies at the folk high school, he says he has always thought about doing something more creative. Thomas explains that his approach to life choices comes largely from his upbringing. He has learned not to make decisions based on external expectations but rather that it is important to decide for oneself. Thomas explains that his decision to apply to a folk high school to complete his grades was largely due to a kind of stress about time passing. He was approaching the age of 25 and did not want to completely close the door on further studies.

Another respondent, Susanna, began looking for work after having dropped out of high school. Susanna's grandmother was getting older, so Susanna and her mother moved closer to her – into a house in the countryside. Susanna signed up for a substitute teaching pool. After a few months, she got a job at a preschool. 'I grew there, you know, when I was working, because I felt like I was doing something,' she recalls.

When COVID-19 hit, Susanna had a job, which she describes as a relief. Many people were laid off when the pandemic struck, and having a job and earning her own money gave her a sense of security. Susanna worked at various preschools in the area. Eventually, she became more permanent at one preschool and stayed there for 2.5-3 years. 'I grew there because when you work with responsibility, you start to feel, OK, I actually can do these things.' She describes working with small children as affirmative: 'A hug, smiles, and waves when you arrive.'

The accounts imply that stigma is contextual. Within the educational system – a setting that all children, adolescents, and young adults inevitably find themselves in – there is, in essence, one primary recognised role: to study and to earn the credentials necessary to progress to the next stage of education. However, upon stepping outside of this system, the interviewees encounter different contexts governed by other value systems. In some settings, performing well without formal education may, in fact, be a source of recognition. Taken to its extreme, education itself could even be perceived as a hindrance to engaging with 'real life.' Moreover, in these contexts, skills other than academic achievement may be valued more highly.

Yet, after a few years in the labour market the interviewees express gaining an eagerness to finish their studies. Susanna had told herself she would take a gap year, but it had now turned into far more than that. Hiwa too expresses similar feelings of urgency: 'With my poor motivation in school, it's been kind of... hard. I've felt the pressure. After high school, I thought, damn, now I have to get it together, now I have to get an education.'

All four interviewees describe relatively smooth entries into the labour market, often transitioning gradually as they left school to start working. Their experiences challenge dominant narratives and research that link academic failure directly to unemployment and poverty. As their stories show, work offered not only financial steadiness but also a sense of belonging and a renewed self-esteem after their stumbling journey through the education system.

Although in employment and relatively satisfied, Susanna, Thomas, and Hiwa talk of stress as a factor for applying to folk high school. For Emil it is more a question of being fed up with people looking down upon him and once he completed his folk high school studies he went back to work.

The folk high school – an environment for revaluing

We have already discussed how the narratives conveyed a critique of traditional educational settings. For many, rigidity posed a problem – whether due to diagnoses, mental health issues, anti-authoritarian attitudes, or an unwillingness to follow informal codes, such as dress or conversational norms, the interviewees struggled to meet the demands that traditional schooling presented.

When turning to the folk high school to acquire qualifications that had not been obtained in the past, students did so in the hope of finding a different type of learning environment. It is unclear to what extent the respondents were familiar with the pedagogy of the folk high school and how it would differ from traditional education. Thomas jokingly, yet somewhat seriously, says that he thinks he googled something like 'how the hell do you do it, how do I get my grades?'

Before applying for a folk high school Thomas tried municipal adult education (MAE) of which he said: 'it doesn't work for me. Meeting once a week for a lesson, that doesn't work. It's like school is something abstract. It doesn't really exist.'

Susanna in turn had relatives that had attended folk high schools. She looked up some folk high schools online and sent an email to one of the schools. She was invited for a visit over a cup of coffee.

> No one knew about it either, because I felt like, I don't want any pressure that I'm going there and have to follow through with something. I had only told my mom that I was going into town for something... so no one knew about this meeting except me. I went there, we talked a bit, and I told them a little about my school background and about who I am as a person.

The person from the folk high school encouraged Susanna to apply. 'And then he said, "I think you should apply," and he also added, "I'm not really supposed to say this, but I think if you apply, you'll definitely get in."'

In a sense, the initial cup of coffee with its accompanying 'secret' remarks becomes a way of initiating Susanna into the school. The interaction can be seen as an inversion of a typical admissions interview – both the coffee and the comments suggest a desire to immediately shift the interaction toward social aspects, setting aside the academic and qualification-oriented dimensions of learning and schooling, or at least, for the time being, placing them in the background.

The relationship between student and teacher is mentioned in all the stories. It is described as relaxed, with learning taking place on more equal terms – where everyone is treated as an adult. Thomas highlights that some of his teachers were more or less 'of the same age' as the students, adding that 'there isn't the same authority. It's more like a friend teaching you things, or more like a colleague. And then you might listen a little more carefully.' A connection was established further by common interests:

> And sometimes, you even share the same interests as some teachers, you know? Like, there's this teacher who collects vinyl records, just like I do, and it just makes everything easier, you know? Everything he says just feels closer to me now.

For Thomas, having a personal relationship with the teachers enabled him to engage and pay attention in class. In a place where having messed up in the past was the norm, a sense of kinship and common ground developed among the students through their shared experiences with traditional school. Thomas again: 'You have something in common with everyone in that, well, obviously we've all fucked up when we were kids.'

For some, who choose to live in the housing provided by the school – an option offered by many folk high schools – the lines between what is formal and informal learning blurred. One moment you are in the classroom, and the next, you are in the dormitory, making it harder to distinguish between formal learning spaces and informal, relaxed environments. Hiwa, for instance, lived at the school when studying there: 'We baked and did a lot of fun things!'

One way in which the permissive folk high school-environment might manifest itself is also in how people (both teachers and students) dress. About the other students Emil says:

> I have never seen such an odd collection of people as I have here. If you think you've seen everything or met all kinds of people, you haven't until you come here. You think you're unique, and then someone shows up with cat ears.

Although the person wearing cat ears may stand out in their outfit, they simultaneously push the boundaries of the surrounding environment, shifting the threshold of eccentricity. What might be considered odd outside the school becomes unremarkable within it. Emil's account suggests that the folk high school milieu may reshape perceptions of what stands out. The cat ears serve as a playful subversion of norms, exposing the arbitrariness of conventions – making explicit that normativity is contextual. Goffman puts forth that 'a necessary condition for social life is the sharing of a single set of normative expectations' (Goffman, 1963/1986, p. 127). Juxtaposed with Emil's narrative, we might even consider that oddness itself has acquired a normative symbolic value.

The same passage, in a Goffmanesque (1963/1986) analysis, can simultaneously function as a consolidation practice, reinforcing the folk high school and its participants as strange, positioned on the outside, and perpetually marginal. In this way, the playful mockery of conventions does not merely expose their arbitrariness but also highlights the uncertain position of those who exist outside dominant expectations. The playact is allowed only on stage.

An aspect to consider is whether the environment itself prepares individuals for other settings. When Thomas reflects on how he absorbs teaching, he returns to high school and what did not work for him there, drawing parallels to university studies, which he imagines are similar to high school studies:

> And I'm just like, it doesn't work for me, and that's probably why I've been kind of scared to apply to university. If I sit in a lecture hall like that, I'll just… it'll be hard to focus for that long. I just don't think I can sit at home and study for four hours for an exam. I have a hard time imagining myself doing that.

In an extended reasoning, one can question whether this type of space becomes a space to withdraw into rather than a space for rehearsals. Hiwa navigates similar waters but is more straightforward in her analysis. She says that the folk high school's second-chance course did not really prepare her for university studies.

> At university, there's a lot of self-study. At folk high school, it's more about finishing things on site, and then you're done, while at university, it's more about organising it yourself. If you have an exam in about a month, it's your own responsibility to attend the lectures and prepare for the exam. At folk high school, we didn't have exams; everything is done on-site, and then it's finished.

She continues and explains that high school was more preparatory for university:

> Because there, it's more like you have an assignment to complete by the following week, and it's your job to make sure it's done. Then, when you turn it in, you get feedback, or you've succeeded or not, and you get a grade – same as in university. Pass or fail.

Susanna's story expresses comparable sentiments, but here one senses that the underlying question is whether success at a folk high school is truly a significant achievement.

> I feel like I've failed at everything, and that I keep on failing. It's hard because even though I felt like graduating from [the folk high school] was an achievement, I still feel like I haven't succeeded.

Implicitly Susanna raises the question of whether or not the learning that takes place at the folk high school is considered genuinely valid learning.

Discussion

The analysis of the participants' narratives illustrates how educational experiences, societal structures, and personal choices intertwine to shape their trajectories. Previous research emphasises the far-reaching consequences of school failure, including risks of social exclusion and poverty (Cederberg & Hartsmar, 2013; Nilsen et al., 2022).

The stories herein cannot so easily be integrated into such broad views. Although it is noticeable that low-skilled jobs can bring stigma – Emil's story openly addresses this – he expresses no desire, at least for now, to pursue higher education to land a white-collar job. Thomas and Susanna, in turn, seem hesitant to pursue higher education, stemming not so much from unwillingness as from an uncertainty regarding whether their newly won qualifications have proven them ready for higher education – indicating that stigma lingers. This can be said to shed light on the complexities regarding academic failure and the need for recognising individual stories, having them penetrate generalisations.

Work experience, a significant component in the participants' stories, acted as both an enabler and a limitation. Participants described feeling empowered by earning their own income and gaining independence, yet their narratives also highlighted the limitations of low-skilled jobs, which often led to a renewed desire for further education. This duality aligns with research suggesting that perceptions of labour market outcomes

can both motivate and constrain educational decision-making (Gustafsson et al., 2016). These perceptions influence how individuals weigh the value of further education against immediate opportunities in the labour market.

One way to interpret participants' narratives is as discourses of agency. Their stories suggest an implicit expectation that individuals bear personal responsibility for their failures, potentially reframing academic failure as intentional – something done 'knowingly'. Even resistance or deliberate rejection can be forms of agency, and given the cultural value placed on not being passive or victimised (Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2013), agency might partially redeem failure. You have failed, yes, but at least you have agency.

Conversely, the truly stigmatised position emerges from passivity – being 'a seed in the wind', lacking choice or decisiveness. Susanna's narrative exemplifies this clearly, as her greatest distress stems not from dropping out itself but from the subsequent passive phase of inactivity.

Yet agency can also appear as intentional divergence from normative expectations. Second-chance education is typically understood as a pathway to higher education. Particularly Emil's case complicates this view: he earns qualifications only to return deliberately to his previous type of work, 'wasting' education as a conscious and unrepentant choice rather than through passivity. This kind of agency positions students as empowered, able to act against institutional expectations. While Emil's stance might not be widely shared, it highlights how educational systems, framed as marketplaces offering commodities (Page, 1998; Brancaleone & O'Brien, 2011), inherently allow individuals the freedom to refuse or repurpose their 'purchases.'

In addition, keeping people – particularly those at risk of long-term unemployment due to past academic struggles – in school longer is helped by stigmatising academic failure. Education in this train of thought helps managing unemployment. Students are taught to stay busy, to stay active in so as idleness does not become a learnt way of living. This may funnel individuals toward more schooling when they might prefer to try to find a job (Andersson & Bergstedt, 1996). Society pushes ideals of self-fulfilment and independence but paradoxically stigmatises people, like Emil, who truly pursue such ideals.

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