Transcript of ENHANCE Podcast Episode: Facilitating adult learning in the second chance classroom, experiences from Färnebo folk high school
Recorded by: Farnebo

Jonathan: Hello and welcome to the Enhancepod. In this episode of the Enhancepod we meet Therese Fransson, Widad Kawasmi and Mikael Skoglund who talk about how they work on a general course at Färnebo Folk High School so that the students there can succeed and find their own path to education. Listen on to take part in a conversation that is about, among other things, frying pancakes, the importance of believing in everyone's ability, working without stress and building a foundation for reflective conversation.

Widad: My name is Widad. I work in a general course with math, English and Swedish as second languages and also with SMF. SMF is a study-motivating folk high school course that comes through the employment service.

Mikael: My name is Mikael and I also work at the General Course here in Gävle with mathematics. I have also worked with thematic subjects and Swedish before, so I have experience with those subjects as well, so to speak. But now the focus is on math.

Therese: My name is Therese and I also work with math just like Widad and Micke. And then I work with thematic subjects, and thematic subjects are when we work in an integrated manner with science, social studies, history and religion.

Jonathan: You all work on this thing called the general course. For those who don't know what it is, can you describe it a little more closely?

Mikael: I can start there a little bit. The general course. I usually think of it as giving participants who, for various reasons, may not have had it so easy in primary and secondary school and may have left these forms of study with failing or non-approved grades and things like that, a chance to be able to study again, for example, a primary school qualification and a secondary school qualification. I think it is an extremely important part of the role of the folk high school.

Jonathan: But enrolling in high school or taking compulsory school subjects, you can also do that at komvux (the municipal adult education center) What would you say is the difference between a general course at at folk high school and komvux?

Therese: At the folk high school in a general course, the group is very, very important. We work a lot together, like all day here, and we as teachers try to pay a lot of attention to the group and create a good group dynamic, while my perception of komvux is that it is a bit more independent studies where you kind of work on your own.

Jonathan: Exactly.

Widad: And we don't have exams here at the folk high school and no homework either. It's just the Thursday assignment that the participants have every Thursday.

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Jonathan: Yes, exactly. Are there any other differences worth mentioning?

Mikael: It's both as Widad and Therese have said here that, I experience, if you study at Komvux it's very, very much like you absorb facts and a bit more traditionally. We work more, and we'll perhaps get into that a little later if we talk about this with the theme. We work more, I was going to say, interdisciplinary. It may sound a bit ambitious, but we try to work in such a way that we integrate different things. For example, Swedish and the theme. But if we take a participant who is working on a project in the theme, for example water, which we are working on now, they may need to write things and work with the language as well. Then it's very good that you integrate it with Swedish, so that Swedish doesn't become some little satellite of its own where you're also writing text, but then we kind of kill two birds with one stone there. And I think that is very characteristic of this particular folk high school form, that you work with concrete things that you connect to natural science, history, religion, things like that.

Therese: We also work a lot on relationship building where we teachers work very closely with the participants, both with adaptations and their wishes and so relationships are an important part of folk high school.

Jonathan: I think we can talk a little more about these different parts for the general course, you are all working on that. But you also worked on a course called study motivation folk high school course. Tell us a little more about what it is.

Widad: Yes, it's a fairly short course. The participants come through the employment service for three months and they only learn Swedish. They're not at a very low level, but they need to use the language quite a lot. And we work on that by watching films, working with grammar and study visits, and also by going with them to certain places here in Gävle and using the language.

Jonathan: And it's a course that you can have a chance to take if you're registered with the employment service.

Widad: Yes, exactly. As a job seeker then. And then if you're doing well with the language then you can sign up for a general course later.

Jonatan: But the general course, you're not assigned to by the employment service. You simply apply for it like you would apply for a municipal adult education or something.

Therese: Exactly. The participants have applied for a general course because they want to take a general course as an alternative to a municipal adult education or something.

Jonathan: Therese, Mikael came in here a little bit about this theme. What do you think about a theme? I know you are teaching a theme now. What are you doing in the theme right now?

Therese: Yes, right now, as Micke said, we have the theme of the sea. So now we are working a lot with natural science but of course connected to social science and history, we

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are working a lot with human impact on the sea, at the same time as we are of course trying to approach natural science in a good way as well. So there are some experiments and of course a lot of group discussions as always with the theme.

Jonathan: I also felt like asking because you two are math teachers. Or you are all math teachers. What is it like to study math at a folk high school in a general course?

Mikael: Yes, I can start there a little bit. I think it is a very good place to study math, because we work very individually with the participants based on their conditions and things like that. Math as a subject is in a way quite easily planned, in the sense that it is quite controlled, you go through a number of areas, statistics, algebra, what should we say the four methods of calculation, geometry and things like that and you have to brush them off. But on the other hand, you can then weave in, you can integrate it with the theme. I had a funny little example here, but I don't know if I sent it out, but I saw here that in connection with this high pressure that was over the Nordic countries here in February, which gave us this cold, 278 cubic kilometers of water were pushed out of the Baltic Sea. And it's a really fun example to let the participants calculate how many liters are 278 cubic kilometers. So it's a good example of how to integrate themes. We might work a little differently, I don't know, but for me, yeah, I work so that everyone is in different areas, right? So it's not like in high school, hello today we're all going to go through algebra or how we simplify and things like that, but everyone is in different chapters, so you go around and work very individually with the participants and things like that.

Mikael: But what I think is very important then, from a folk high school perspective, is that we have come across so many participants, who have poor self-confidence when it comes to math. They believe that they are bad at math, because they have been told that at school, or that life has told them, or whatever it comes from. And it turns out that, this that they believe that they are bad, is precisely because they have this poor self-confidence and then they suddenly discover that, it is so exciting to work with them and see when this crown falls down, that is, that you can go in and help them because often they say like this, yes but I don't understand anything. I say then, but if you don't understand anything then I can't help you. But on the other hand, we can break this down. What is it that you don't understand? And then you focus on that. And then they often discover, well is it like that? Yes. Yes. And then they suddenly discover and I've had participants who have said like this, that yes but this was really fun. And then they've been sitting around like the week before and swearing that this doesn't work. I can't work with this. Ugh, I don't understand anything. And that's how we work with math at folk high school level, so to speak.

Jonathan: Do you recognize this picture Micke gave that there are many participants who have poor math self-confidence? Is that so?

Widad: Yes, exactly. And there are many who think they are not good at math, but later show that they are really good and they continue to study math foundation one, math one and two and then they are really happy when they show that they can do math.

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Mikael: I mean it's fantastic that you have participants who a few semesters ago said I don't understand fractions. I can't do anything. They are sitting and working on derivatives today. I think that's fantastic.

Jonathan: But if we stop there a little bit, because what is, you kind of touched on a little bit, what a strategy can be there. What do you do to make them feel like "yes, but I get this". You talk about the importance of breaking it down into parts if I understood it.

Mikael: Yes, so on the one hand I think it's important that they write down all the steps for example when they are going to calculate, that they don't just sit and calculate in their head and then write the answer, but that they show what they have done. Then you can go in and look and then you sit down with them, so you can go through a task and then you often see where the question was, if I take a concrete example, it can be like this, that if they are sitting with fractions for example, they haven't really understood this thing with the least common denominator or how to abbreviate. Yes, but then you focus on that part then. And then it can also be like this, that they are different participants. Some want a little theory at the beginning and then they start counting, others are just confused by the theory. Then we start solving a math exercise then. We work on this like you make pancakes or a recipe, eh,bam bam, We have these steps. Yeah, okay then. And then you can tie it to the theory. So it's very different for different participants too.

Jonathan: Therese, how would you describe what you do to get participants with poor math confidence to get on their feet?

Therese: Yes, but exactly. No, but I really think what Micke ended with here is such a key thing, because I think that a lot of things in like regular schools, at least when I went to school, it was just like that, that now everyone has to count the same page at the same speed and if you don't, if you need more time, then you feel like, I can't do this. So I think this is exactly talking to like every participant we have and also trying to be responsive, if you see someone picking up the phone or starting to zoom out, to talk to them and try to find a structure that works for them. Then maybe it becomes too difficult to sit with a whole book in front of you. Then maybe, I've sometimes said, yes but okay, I'll check off. I'll write down like three exercises that you're going to do. When you've done the three then I'll come back and we'll check them through and then you'll get three new ones.

Jonathan: Mm.

Therese: So that you sort of divide it up, while some might rather need to be fed. They might need a little more difficult stuff. They might need to skip certain parts that are a little easier. But I think that's exactly where we have the opportunity to see each one and be able to make a plan that suits everyone or each one of them.

Jontahan: Yes, that's the thing about building relationships that you were talking about earlier. Mm. How do you do it?

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Widad: Yes, what Theres says is that we sit with one by one. Everyone has different needs so that we give them security. We sit and talk to them, so that it's like a normal conversation first and then yes, I can't do math they say. No, I don't understand. And then sometimes I need to repeat the same speech several times. And then it starts to roll later. So conversations are important in math too. So we feel that we're thinking with them. Where do they have shortcomings? Where do they get stuck, as Micke said, and then they start to show that they can.

Jonathan: Mm. You're talking about a situation where it works. For most people it sounds like you have a strategy. Speaking of what you said Micke if you do it in a similar way. It still sounds like you do it in a slightly similar way that you try to break it down, make it manageable in parts. Sometimes you just pour it on, fry pancakes.

Mikael: Well, yes, it's also based on different conditions, right, how some people learn. You kind of notice that, no, here it doesn't work to sit and go through theory, right, but here we do it instead. And then based on that doing, you can then start discussing why we did it this way and why we changed signs there and things like that, right, instead of starting to sort of go through the rules for changing signs when simplifying algebra, so to speak.

Widad: And sometimes the participants help each other so it's great that they understand, well, where did I get stuck before. So I can explain this in my way and in the teachers' way. So they usually help each other before they turn to the teacher and that's great. It works great in my math class.

Jonathan: Do you others recognize that you have such a culture or whatever you call it?

Mikael: Yes. And it's great if they want to help each other, but I also think that an important part of this math self-confidence thing is to de-dramatize the whole thing in some way. Just take it easy, as Therese said, and don't rush things.

Jonathan: How much math do you have in a week when you're on a general course?

Therese: Most people have six hours, but it can vary a bit. Some have three hours and some have nine hours. A bit depending on what other subjects they have and so on. But six hours is probably the most common.

Jonathan: Because it's a bit different t when we compared it to Komvux, when you study here, almost everyone studies math on a general course, or is it like that?

Therese: Everyone studies math if they don't already finish it while they're here. Then they can work on a specialization. But everyone studies math when they start here.

Jonathan So that's part of that package of a general course.

Therese: I'll add just in terms of math. I think an important thing is also that they feel that we teachers really genuinely believe in them. Sometimes former participants have sent an

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email or something and written like this, "thank you for believing in me in math". I think that also does a lot, that they feel that we are kind of on their side or whatever you say.

Jonathan: Yes, but it's exciting to talk about math right now. Nobody escapes math in a general course. But it's also something you need to move forward in the educational community. We can compare a little, because we've talked about math, with the theme studies, because it's also a fairly large part of the general course with science, religion, history, social studies. How do you make the participants participate and succeed in the theme? How do you do it?

Therese: Yes, compared to math, I think that participants rarely come with as little self-confidence in the theme subjects. So it's a little easier that way. Many feel a little more comfortable with it, or they may not have the trauma connected to the theme in the same way. So we have a better conditions there. I think that the hardest thing about the theme lessons is how it's arranged in the schedule. Math is kind of in the mornings. We've put the slightly heavier subjects in the mornings and then we have the theme, which is a slightly easier subject and more discussion-based in the afternoon. But it also means that many people are quite tired after lunch. So the strategy in the theme to get everyone involved and get them to contribute and have the opportunity and develop their knowledge is, I think, that they can be active and they can contribute at the same time as they can cope. So there needs to be moments of rest and moments of high activity. I think that is the biggest challenge. Sometimes it can be that you need to go through something during an entire lesson, but that you can still do it in different ways. That you can send them out in a group discussion, you can go through some theory, maybe briefly with the help of a PowerPoint. You can have an experiment and a kahoot, for example. So try to vary it. Now we may not include all those moments in a two-hour theme lesson, but still try and reach the different strengths of the participants. If it is just about writing, it can be quite tough for those who have a hard time writing, but then it can be a small moment of writing and then it can be something oral.

Mikael: Yes. Yes. It's been a while since I had a theme, but what I experienced as a challenge when it comes to the theme was also this, that if we had the theme of the forest, for example, then I experienced that in order to have a good discussion, in order to have a good exchange, you have to have some basic knowledge and not everyone has it, right? But then you have to work with that first, right? It becomes, I can be a little critical sometimes about this if you say that, yes, but it's important that students should do research, but then they have to know what they are going to research about. So you have to have certain basic knowledge to be able to discuss and have critical opinions about things, it's a positive challenge in that way. But it's important to get that in there in some way, that you have to have basic knowledge to be able to discuss and have a good discussion about a theme and not just go on and on, because then there will be no discussion, then it becomes strange in some way, right?

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Jonathan: But there are slightly different tracks here. Therese, you emphasize the importance of variety or having different working methods based on the challenge of the afternoons, and Micke, you talk about the importance of giving participants basic knowledge that allows them to have opinions about society.

Mikael: Yes. And what you discuss, right?

Jonathan: Yes. What you discuss.

Mikael: Otherwise, you build on a loose foundation, right. Then it becomes unstructured. They don't understand anything, right?

Jonathan: Mm. Mm. Widad, what are your experiences from theme teaching?

Widad: Yes, it was when they work in groups.

Jonathan: Yes.

Widad: So sometimes searching for information themselves is not part of the theme. It's not really that they had to sit and search together and talk and find information. And then with this class that I worked with last, it's really important that they get the planning well in advance, a day before or a week before or that they can sit at home and prepare a little and keep track of what we're going to talk about.

Jonathan: In what way do you think it helped them to get involved?

Widad: Yes, it helped a lot. They got involved in the lesson. They understood what we were talking about even though there was no basic knowledge as Micke says.

Jonathan: Mm.

Widad: So they could find information at home and read in peace and quiet before they came a little more prepared.

Jonathan: Yes. What would you say is the most difficult then? If you think about it, there are many different participants here and some get involved in the theme easily. For some it is a little more difficult. For those for whom it is a little more difficult, what is the reason for that?

Therese: Yes, there are many things, I think. But one thing that can be a challenge is that often in the same group there are very different prior knowledge and then you have to sort of plan the lesson so that it is good for everyone. So it is a challenge. And then, I think here too, that it can be a challenge with different forms of NPF adaptations that need to be made as well. By our school's standards, we have quite large groups in thematic subjects, close to 20.

Jonathan: Are the groups larger in thematic subjects than in math?

Therese: It's a bit different too. But that's often the case, because in thematic subjects they study as a whole class, so that often the groups are perhaps a bit larger and then there are

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a lot of different wishes and also different things that limit the participants or hinder them. And I think that can be difficult, that there are 20 of them who all have both their wishes and their conditions for how they learn best, different things they like but also different things that hinder them in, for example, social interaction or something like that. So I don't think it's as difficult in math, because in math they sit more and do the calculations themselves.

Jonathan: What do you think Vidal and Mikael about challenges?

Mikael: Yes, challenges, it is, everything is a challenge really when it comes to this type of school we have, because it makes quite big demands. It is precisely that to get the participants to understand in a good way what we mean when we work with the theme, that it should be connected to different situations or different things and that it can be broad like e.g. the sea, discuss crime and punishment, or we can talk about how Sweden is governed, something like that, then you have to weave in different perspectives on this, right, instead of sitting and studying natural science, sitting and studying history, sitting and studying religion, sitting in the traditional way, now we weave in things and the participants are shaped by the formal school. It can be difficult for them and understand this popular education pedagogy every time. And it is perhaps not that you can stand and explain it with words, but you have to explain it in action. In other words, how to set up the lessons, how we should work in this way. But it was a great example of this with the coral reefs that you showed Therese, as well as how it has to do with acidification, for example, that they are destroyed and things like that, and then you do practical things and then you get into this, then you get into this with the pH world and what acidification means and where it comes from and things like that instead of sitting and studying chemistry, right?

Jonathan: I think we talked about this example with the coral reefs at coffee. Therese, can you give us a little update here, what is Mikael referring to?

Therese: Yes, but exactly, and the purpose there was just like you say Micke, that I wanted to kind of get them to understand this with pH values, but also understand how human carbon dioxide emissions actually affect the oceans. So then we went through, like, first about climate change, the whole thing, what effects it has, but also about what happens when carbon dioxide is taken up by the oceans, converted into carbonic acid and what happens then? And then we did a little experiment where we tried putting eggshells in vinegar and then we saw that the eggshells dissolved and disappeared.

Jonathan: Exactly. Vinegar is acidic. Sour. Yes, exactly.

Therese: So then we could kind of understand a little bit about why ocean acidification is problematic too, not just temperature.

Jonathan: That's an example of varying, of working in different ways. But the strategies you have in math and in theme are a little different. In math, you work quite individually.

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Mikael: You can also work in a group if you find a suitable task and things like that have also occurred, right?

Mikael: So it's possible to do that. But the main part has been individual work so that you work based on your own circumstances. But it's also possible to include group work.

Jonathan: We've also touched a little on this with obstacles and a little different things that can prevent a participant from getting involved. What are the most common things that you perceive as obstacles here at this school, where there are adults who study and it's voluntary, you actively seek it out, even though many find the right thing and it goes well, there can still be people who don't quite find their way. What are the most common obstacles?

Widad: Yes, I think that language has a big impact when it comes to the theme, for example. Some people have knowledge, but understanding the same knowledge in Swedish becomes a challenge for them and for us teachers. And then, for example, the theme lessons, as Therese says, are in the afternoon, which makes them tired and they don't take in much. Yes. And some sometimes have no knowledge at all. No basic knowledge, especially when it comes to the theme.

Widad: And it takes them longer time. I can't say it stops them or prevents them completely. But it takes a lot longer time. That ´s the way it is.

Jonathan: It can be difficult to get involved when you lack those basic skills that you talked about earlier. Then it's like what is this about? Why should I care? But this thing about the language that you were talking about, how do you work with it then?

Widad: We usually give them time to ask us questions. What does this mean? For example, they can sometimes translate into Arabic, but we usually give them time to continue trying to understand themselves, before we go in and explain.

Jonathan: Language can be an obstacle, as can tiredness in the afternoons. What are the biggest obstacles?

Therese: I would say what happens outside of school is the absolute biggest obstacle. It could be their economic situation

Jonathan: Mm.

Therese: It could be a big thing that makes it difficult to focus on school. Even if you are here, it could be that things are going wrong, that there are a lot of phone calls you have to make and so on. It could be mental illness, that you feel so bad that you can't even get to school and then you can't work. So I would probably say that the biggest obstacle is things that are not really connected to school but that of course spill over into school.

Jonathan: Do you want to add anything about obstacles?

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Mikael: No, I also agree that it is the language and then it is also things that happen outside of school that have an impact. But I think it is interesting this thing about language, because you can encounter that in mathematics too, that you could think, well, but math is an international language. It looks the same everywhere but it really isn't. And especially if you look at the books that the participants have, there is what is called text based exercises. So that you have to solve a problem, right? I have noticed that it is not always the case that these math book authors get it right in this, even I, who have Swedish as my native language, can wonder what they are looking for in this particular question. But then we have to sit down together and figure out what it could be that they are looking for.

Jonathan: Interesting, guys. We have talked about many things and we have talked about strategies in math and in themes and obstacles and so on. But I think we should round off by asking you to send in your three best tips. Do you want to start with your best tip?

Therese: Yes, three best tips.

Jonathan: No. you only say one.

Therese: I was prepared with three here.

Jonathan: That could be something we have talked about. I am thinking more like a summary here.

Therese: Then I weave two into one. So then I would like to say see each participant. Listen to each participant but don't act on all wishes that the participants send out because then it will be messy.

Jonathan: Mm. Okay.

Therese: I don't know if that was clear.

Jonathan: Yes, but it's pretty clear. Yeah.

Mikael: I'll take it from the math perspective then, work calmly and methodically. Write down what you're working on properly. Document.

Widal: and let the participants help each other in the math lesson.

Jonathan: Hey guys, thank you so much for this chat.

Participants: Thank you. Thank you. Enjoy.

Jonathan: Yes, you have just listened to an episode of the Enhancepod. If you want to listen to more episodes, you can find information about the podcast on the Färnebo Folkhögskolas website. There you can also read more about the project and good examples of democratic popular education from different parts of Europe. Thank you for listening.

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