

This Is How Scandinavia Got Great

The power of educating the whole person.



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Almost everybody admires the Nordic model. Countries like Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland have high economic productivity, high social equality, high social trust and high levels of personal happiness.

Progressives say it's because they have generous welfare states. Some libertarians point out that these countries score high on nearly every measure of free market openness. Immigration restrictionists note that until recently they were ethnically homogeneous societies.

But Nordic nations were ethnically homogeneous in 1800, when they were dirt poor. Their economic growth took off just after 1870, way before their welfare states were established. What really launched the Nordic nations was generations of phenomenal educational policy.

The 19th-century Nordic elites did something we haven't been able to do in this country recently. They realized that if their countries were to prosper they had to create truly successful “folk schools” for the least educated among them. They realized that they were going to have to make lifelong learning a part of the natural fabric of society.

They look at education differently than we do. The German word they used to describe their approach, *bildung*, doesn't even have an English equivalent. It means the complete moral, emotional, intellectual and civic transformation of the person. It was based on the idea that if people were going to be able to handle and contribute to an emerging industrial society, they would need more complex inner lives.

Today, Americans often think of schooling as the transmission of specialized skill sets — can the student read, do math, recite the facts of biology. *Bildung* is devised to change the way students see the world. It is devised to help them understand complex systems and see the relations between things — between self and society, between a community of relationships in a family and a town.

As Lene Rachel Andersen and Tomas Bjorkman put it in their book “The Nordic Secret,” “*Bildung* is the way that the individual matures and takes upon him or herself ever bigger personal responsibility towards family, friends, fellow citizens, society, humanity, our globe, and the global heritage of our species, while enjoying ever bigger personal, moral and existential freedoms.”



A classroom in northern Sweden. David Ramos/Getty Images

The Nordic educators worked hard to cultivate each student's sense of connection to the nation. Before the 19th century, most Europeans identified themselves in local and not national terms. But the Nordic curriculum instilled in students a pride in, say, their Danish history, folklore and heritage.

“That which a person did not burn for in his young days, he will not easily work for as a man,” Christopher Arndt Bruun wrote. The idea was to create in the mind of the student a sense of wider circles of belonging — from family to town to nation — and an eagerness to assume shared responsibility for the whole.

The Nordic educators also worked hard to develop the student’s internal awareness. That is to say, they helped students see the forces always roiling inside the self — the emotions, cravings, wounds and desires. If you could see those forces and their interplay, as if from the outside, you could be their master and not their slave.

Their intuition was that as people grow, they have the ability to go through developmental phases, to see themselves and the world through ever more complex lenses. A young child may blindly obey authority — Mom, Dad, teacher. Then she internalizes and conforms to the norms of the group. Then she learns to create her own norms based on her own values. Then she learns to see herself as a node in a network of selves and thus learns mutuality and holistic thinking.

The purpose of *bildung* is to help people move through the uncomfortable transitions between each way of seeing.

That educational push seems to have had a lasting influence on the culture. Whether in Stockholm or Minneapolis, Scandinavians have a tendency to joke about the way their sense of responsibility is always nagging at them. They have the lowest rates of corruption in the world. They have a distinctive sense of the relationship between personal freedom and communal responsibility.

High social trust doesn’t just happen. It results when people are spontaneously responsible for one another in the daily interactions of life, when the institutions of society function well.

In the U.S., social trust has been on the decline for decades. If the children of privilege get to go to the best schools, there’s not going to be much social mutuality. If those schools do not instill a love of nation, there’s not going to be much shared responsibility.

If you have a thin educational system that does not help students see the webs of significance between people, does not even help students see how they see, you’re going to wind up with a society in which people can’t see through each other’s lenses.

When you look at the Nordic *bildung* model, you realize our problem is not only that we don’t train people with the right job skills. It’s that we don’t have the right lifelong development model to instill the mode of consciousness people need to thrive in a complex pluralistic society.

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