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The course for educators in social integration for migrants and refugees (FIF) at the Slagelse Institute of Social Education

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Background

Denmark was an homogeneous country with few language conflicts until 1960: everyone spoke Danish, practically everyone was a member of the same Danish Church, and there were no ethnic tensions, because we were all Danish. This unique situation may help explain why Danes now find great difficulty in coping with immigrants and refugees. There is a tendency to blame foreigners for all the evils and poor social conditions perceived in Danish society, and the Danes seem to have a problem in understanding and accepting that immigration is a part of modern society and that this development is unlikely to stop in the foreseeable future.

Some Danes look upon refugees and immigrants as ‘strangers’ and as a threat, while others consider them as ‘exotic’. Both views situate the immigrants and refugees as ‘them, from outside’, as opposed to ‘us, the real Danes’. Neither of these viewpoints offers a complete picture: individuals cannot be solely defined by their culture, but must be seen first as a human being with her or his own special abilities.

In *Kulturforskelle- kulturmøder I praxis* (Eriksen, 2002) multicultural communication is described as an important part of successful immigration. But power and power differences are often social barriers between the Danish and immigrant communities. In most situations where immigrants and Danes communicate, it is the Dane who possesses the power. Consequently it is the immigrant who adapts to the Dane and to the Danish way of life - although this may be contested by Danes in the police, the social services and in the school system, who often express irritation at immigrants' ‘bad’ Danish, as though they think that immigrants do not want to learn good Danish in order not to understand what they are told. However, it is possible that the real reason for such irritation lies with the Danes, who have defined the conditions of the social context and therefore demand a degree of adaptation; adaptation which only is possible for a person who knows the Danish context.

Communication is sharing information in a broad perspective, a process of definition between two or more parties. A common model of communication is that operating between two partners: a sender and a receiver: in this, messages may be misunderstood if the receiver does not perceive the purposes of the sender. Communication does not take place if the receiver does not perceive the message: to speak to a wall, or to speak Danish to a person who only speaks Bengali, is not communication.

At bygge bro (Mors, 2001) describes working with immigrants and refugees where the connections between different cultures go in several directions: Mors writes of building bridges between cultures, and the need for mutual respect in a Danish society in which the majority sets the agenda. He believes that a mutual exchange and respect of cultural values is an illusion, and that equality lies more in a mutual understanding and respect for different cultures and the value of these cultures. The author advocates that newcomers adapt to the Danish reality and discover in general terms the way life is lived in Denmark,

how relations between the genders are conducted, and the respect for the freedom of the human being and independence - but retain the possibility of maintaining their mother tongue, religion and religious feasts, and a cultural commonality through music, dance, literature, food, and social company, and that all these can enrich Danish society.

In a preparing the course for the Education of Social Educators in Denmark we need to be clear that foreign students must learn and understand that the development of Denmark, and the values of the Danish welfare system are a result of the economic growth which has taken place since the Second World War, and that economic freedom was followed by the freedom of standards, followed by the demands of democracy and the demands for equality between men and women, the respect of individual human beings, and finally the respect of children and their rights.

The FIF Course at Slagelse

In Slagelse we have many immigrants and refugees who present a challenge to our education system. At Slagelse Institute of Social Education we run a special preparatory course for immigrants and refugees who wish to train as Social Educators. One purpose of the course is to ensure that the foreign students have sufficient ability in the Danish language, and the cultural and knowledge background necessary to study Danish social education and to enable them to work successfully in Danish pedagogical institutions.

The course was initiated by Dansk Flygtningehjælp (Danish Refugee Help) some ten years ago: at that time its clear purpose was to integrate refugees and immigrants quickly into the Danish labour market and education system. The European Union's Social Fund provided economic support, as did SUM (Social Development Resources) in Denmark. Currently the Danish Government finances and approves the course.

The education of refugees and immigrants is based on the interests of Danish society, which needs educated people entering the labour market; there is also an increasing need for multi-cultural pedagogues and pedagogical assistants. An important hidden motive is that education removes members of the immigrant group from the unemployment statistics and thus relieves stress on the Danish economy.

The course is called FIF (Preparatory Course for the Education to Social Educator for Immigrants and Refugees). It runs over a year; students undertake 25 weeks of lessons plus a five-week project period and ten weeks placements in practice. All teaching on the course is in Danish, so intending students must understand, speak, read and write Danish on a level which enables them to follow the course.

The learning process for each student begins with a review of the student's own experiences, observations and considerations. Each student has a valuable capacity to do these, a capacity which only waits to be activated, analysed, challenged connected and supplied. This is what we aim to do in preparing course for immigrants and refugees. The student is gaining new knowledge, but is also reflecting upon old knowledge to find a new ways and forge new connections. Often this is a very personal learning curve, but it can also be a mutual process when several students and teachers work together to discover results and ways to study.

Language, Analysis and Values

Learning to handle the Danish language, orally and in written form, is the most important component of the FIF course, and all students must pass a language test at the end of the course. A large number of language lessons are set to achieve the required competence: this teaching is often incorporated into other subjects, methods of teaching and learning theories, which is a tremendous advance. Typically the textual material presented deals with

- children and youngsters
- literature about children's and youth cultures
- theories about children's upbringing
- pedagogical and psychological theories
- literature about society and culture.

Communicative competence is regarded as more important than grammatical qualifications, although it is also important that a student is able to build up a written paper logically, derive relevant knowledge from other texts, view themes from several perspectives, and record the important aspects of the chosen theme with a proper punctuation. This is a huge challenge to the teachers because of the variety of experiences students bring when they start the course.

Integration through education in a multi cultural society?

Niels Mors (2001) writes that integration can be achieved through education, basing his suggestion on new government initiatives to integrate refugees and immigrants into the Danish labour market. He suggests a tightening of the regulations to require communes to ensure immigrants and refugees are offered Danish language teaching programmes, but that if the immigrants and refugees are not activated, their economic support should be withdrawn. This suggests that Danish society still has great problems in integrating refugees and immigrants into the labour market. The subject is debated daily in the Danish media: we have had little success so far, employing both 'whip and carrot' with very few positive results.

Education, Danish lessons and entrance to the labour market are all means to better integration in Denmark, and better integration is necessary to avoid violence, social exclusion and other social problems. However, there would appear to be political resistance which blocks an effective and fair integration policy for the 6 to 7 % of Danes who never learned Danish as their mother tongue and which is based on a belief that if everybody learned Danish in the correct way, all problems would disappear. We need to ask ourselves whether these problems could equally well arise from the fact that many Danes (who have correct Danish) have difficulties living next door to 'the others' and may have personal problems with integrating themselves into a multi-cultural modern Danish society.

Preparatory courses in Institutes of Social Education in Denmark now evaluate their integration projects and report that:

- 6 to 7 % of students have not been successful Danish in the course, but have successfully achieved jobs as pedagogues;

- although language is still a demand, it is not the *only* factor in obtaining a job as a multi-cultural pedagogue.

A number of multi-cultural pedagogues from different ethnic minorities are now being educated in our institutions. Not everything succeeds, but the courses are often respected in refugee and immigrant societies.

The Institutes of Social Education already know that immigrants and refugees are needed, especially in the big cities, where there are many institutions, schools and high schools in which minority social groups make up the majority of students. The question is how many there have to be before Denmark changes its social and education systems and resources to meet their needs. As long as individual institutions only receive a few 'foreigners' the tendency remains that we either discriminate, or we try to assimilate them.

Multi-lingual and multi-cultural perspectives?

In the following section, my colleagues Kirsten Scheel Nielsen and Jesper Froda describe the meeting between Danish and foreign culture in an extraordinary Danish kindergarten, discovering a double effect of language and social training which benefits both the Danish and the 'ethnic' children. The question is, are we able to achieve the same with our older foreign students?