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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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How to welcome children with an Islamic background in Denmark - are they offered citizenship education?

Søren Hegstrup

Hindholm Socialpædagogiske Seminarium (Denmark)

This paper is an investigation into the official welcome given to Islamic refugees arriving in Denmark. The Ministry of Refugees, Immigration and Integration Affairs has produced an official welcome letter in English and Danish but this presents a dilemma. The letter is a contradiction: it states that the refugees are welcome on certain conditions, and as such are citizens for a time. However, they will never become Danish citizens - they will be citizens of a refugee camp.

After a stay in a refugee camp some are lucky and are given asylum. They are offered an apartment in a ghetto with other refugees, where they develop a ghetto citizenship which has very little to do with Danish citizenship. The kindergarten and primary schools disable these children by not offering them citizenship education and by not teaching them in both their mother tongue and Danish. This research is based on interviews with refugees and their descendents.

It has been said that to know another culture, it is not enough to learn the language: you have to learn the humour of the culture. And to learn humour you have to socialise with the people from the culture concerned, you have to integrate into the society. Living in a refugee camp means that you are outside the society. We know from the UK experience that the best way to integrate refugees is to offer them a job from day one. The refugee learns about the society, the culture, the humour and the language. It seems that this is the best way for a refugee to integrate into a new society.

In Denmark we know about this, but official policy is still to put refugees in camps, often in isolated rural places like old military barracks. There we offer them language courses in Danish – which is obviously an inadequate way of introducing people to Danish society. We have since 1999 had a debate in the media. The minister for Refugees, Immigration and Integration Affairs, Bertel Haarder, knows all these facts but shows no political will to do something about the problems. Officially the integration policies have two strategies.

First strategy: ensure a coherent and open democratic society

Diversity can be a strength, but it may also involve the emergence of norm-based integration problems when, for obvious reasons, many people of foreign origin have other perceptions of what is right and wrong than those generally prevailing in Denmark. To promote the development of a coherent and open democratic society, the government plans to enhance efforts within the following fields:

1. equal rights, equal status and active citizenship
2. family, upbringing and schooling

It could be asked why refugees need to learn Danish if they are to be refused asylum. We know that political attitudes towards the Danish refugee problem is quite clear – the refugees are destined to stay in camps until the circumstances in their home country allows them to go back. This is practice as well as policy. Families stay in camps for years waiting for an answer on their asylum application. This hardly gives the right motivation to learn the Danish language, and imparts no knowledge about being a Danish citizen. And *if* they are lucky they will typically be offered housing in urban areas where the concentration of immigrants is high.

Places of residence

Immigrants and their descendants from other countries are not spread evenly throughout the country. In 243 of the nation's 275 municipalities the proportion of resident immigrants and descendants is lower than the national average of 5.8%. In half of the nation's municipalities this same proportion is at most 2.3%. In fourteen municipalities the proportion is over 8.1% of the local population, but the largest proportions can be found in the municipalities of Ishøj (23.7%), Brøndby (19.9%) and Albertslund (18.5%).

Immigrant groups tend to conglomerate in urban areas. Some 40% of immigrants and their descendants live in or around Copenhagen, Århus, Odense, Aalborg or Frederiksberg, while just 21.5% of Danes live in these same municipalities. This makes it very difficult for immigrants and descendants to socialise into Danish society. In some schools 80% of the pupils do not have Danish as a first language, and in some schools more than ten different nationalities are represented. In very few schools are the pupils are given lessons in their own mother tongue.

In many of the big provincial towns we see this same concentration of immigrants. In Denmark we have open enrolment, which means that parents can choose the school that they prefer. Very often Danish parents prefer schools with few immigrants and descendants. This situation is less than desirable.

Mehmet Yükksekva, a consultant for the Ministry of Integration, says in the newspaper *Politiken* (January 2004) that 'Integration lies in ruins. Both camps - Danish and immigrants-confront each other. One is tossing the head and are demanding the other side without being prepared to offer anything in return'. His point of view is that both parties have to bend towards each other. He goes on:

Too many immigrants are turning their backs on Danish society so that they can worship the culture of their native country in self-sufficient Islamic ghettos. Children are not allowed to participate in Danish birthday parties, the girls have to stay at home, the woman is not allowed to have a job, the immigrants scorn the 'fatuous' culture, and life is lived after the Koran's narrow limits. This attitude is simply dangerous.

Immigrants live in Denmark and must show rapprochement to the Danish standards and values.

Ralf Pittelkow, a well-known Danish researcher and journalist, suggests that the reason that integration of immigrants with an Islamic background is impossible is that Islam is a state religion. He argues (2002) that Islamic and Christian values are incommensurable and hits out at political correctness and value relativism. He believes Danes must learn to stick to the fundamental Danish values that have made the Danish social condition.

Pittelkow says that Islam needs a reformation, such as happened in Europe in the sixteenth century. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Christian countries in the West made the first and important move towards secularisation and the differentiation of religion from policy, but the Age of Enlightenment in the eighteenth century had no influence on Islam. Pittelkow is convinced that the only thing we can hope for is that Islam will be modernised and that this will strengthen respect for the individual and lead to demands for democracy from the people. Like Samuel Huntington (*The Clash of Civilizations*), Pittelkow dares to stand against the underestimation of the significance of cultural differences. His conclusions are clear – immigrants have to learn about Danish citizenship and they have to respect fundamental Danish values and culture.

The Ministry of Immigration's official opinion on family life, upbringing and schooling is set out:

Respect for the private sphere and respect for the individual's freedom and personal integrity – concerning both adults and children – often clash in matters concerning family life and upbringing. It is necessary for society to contribute more to a solution of the problem by defining a limit.

The acceptance that men and women are equal is essential for being able to cope in the workplace, in educational institutions and in society in general. For the individual it is essential to be treated equally and to have the right of self-determination – the right to make important life choices regarding partner, family, education, training and work. Many ethnic minority families maintain traditional role models in which women and girls are not considered the equals of men and boys. Many minority women live an isolated life in their homes, and young girls in particular face powerful control from their families. It is crucial to break this isolation and give women the same opportunities as men. It is essential that the women and young girls who opt out are offered help and support to ensure that cultural isolation is not merely replaced by fear, loneliness and social isolation.

Parents are responsible for the upbringing of their children, and there are limits to how much society can and should become involved. But the limits do entitle children and young people to equality and respect for their personal integrity. Forced marriages and female genital mutilation are far-reaching acts and have irreversible consequences for the rest of their lives. They constitute an unacceptable breach of the individual's fundamental freedoms.

School is an essential element in the lives of all children. In addition to learning subjects, pupils become acquainted with society's unwritten norms, values and rules. It is at school that they learn to create their own non-familial social relations. Parents carry a great responsibility that their children get a good start at school and that they are allowed to participate in the entire school programme. Co-operation and mutual confidence and understanding between school and parents are crucial factors.

It is therefore problematic that some parents choose to send their children on a re-education trip to their country of origin. It is also necessary to ensure that private independent schools do not oppose the goal of preparing their pupils for a life in a society with freedom and democracy.

Second strategy: efforts to help persons with a non-Danish ethnic background to manage better in the education system

Education and familiarity with the Danish language are all-important for successful integration and a prerequisite for the possibility that today's immigrant and refugee children become tomorrow's active citizens. One of the major tasks of the integration policy is to create a framework in which immigrants and refugees and their descendants manage better in the educational system and obtain good skills in Danish. This is more than a vital door-opener to the labour market: it also increases their chances of participating in social and democratic life as active citizens and of understanding and joining the society and community in which they live.

The Ministry's Think Tank

The Ministry of Immigration set up a committee (a so-called 'Think Tank'), which made suggestions concerning bilingual children.

- Children in second and in seventh class tested, so that children with very little Danish are offered specific more teaching. Too many young students from Islamic backgrounds are doing poorly in school, and have difficulties finding work or moving into higher education.
- Children of pre-school age (from age 3) are offered language teaching. Danish classes should be made compulsory in kindergarten, so that parents are no longer prevent their children learning Danish before attending school.

Finally they suggest municipalities build up a corps of Danish volunteers who want to work as hosts for newcomers. Like a mentor, the volunteer should be able to help newcomers to socialise into society, and also to find a job.

Interviews with refugees

These interviews were carried out by two students – both with Islamic backgrounds and both from Iraq, one from the south and one from Kurdistan. One came with her family

as a pre-school aged refugee during the Gulf War and the other was born in Denmark of refugee parents from Kurdistan.

Unfortunately, we were not able to conduct interviews in refugee camps. Instead, we used refugee organisations to make contacts with families that have been in refugee camps and now have been granted asylum and live in Danish society. In two cases we have also undertaken interviews with friends or relations of the student interviewers.

The interviews were carried out as group interviews using the focus group interview method.

The questions

A: experience of

- coming to Denmark
- learning the Danish language
- experience of Danish culture
- experiencing Danish society
- learning about Danish teaching

B: understanding of

- Danish citizenship
- European citizenship
- rights
- duties
- responsibilities

C: has the interviewee been taught

- the Danish language
- their native tongue
- about citizenship related to the Danish society
- about Danish policy (democracy/ Parliament)
- about religion in Denmark (Danish national church).

We conducted six group interviews with four families from South Iraq and with two groups of young descendants of Kurdish refugees. All those interviewed knew the questions beforehand, and had discussed them. Two of the families from Iraq were western-oriented and at least one of the parents was educated to a high academic standard. The other two had been educated informally as craftsmen. Their children are all attending Danish basic schools and upper secondary schools. The answers from the families were largely similar:

Question A

Coming to Denmark was shocking. Everybody was stressed. Nobody had time to tell us about our situation. In the airport we were interviewed individually by the police, the children too. In the refugee centre, other refugees met us with warmth and kindness. There we got information

about our situation, given by other refugees. People in the camp are more or less like a big family.

The meeting with Danish culture was a doubtful pleasure. The Danes were on the surface very smiling, welcoming also, but when you tried to get closer to them they were dismissive. You got the feeling that you could live in Denmark, but you would never become a Danish citizen.

We were offered classes in Danish language. But we were too big a group – and too different in our backgrounds. Some had an academic background and some were illiterate. The teachers seemed indifferent, and knew very little about our home country or about Islamic culture.

To meet the Danish society means to meet the authorities. And that is seldom a good experience because it often has to do with investigation and control. You easily get the feeling that you are not wanted. And that you are only here for a short stay – you are going back as soon as possible.

Bringing children up in Denmark is so far from how we do it in the Islamic culture. And it often gives the boys problems because they are not used to taking orders from women other than their mothers. This is a particular problem in kindergartens.

Question B

Understanding of Danish citizenship is very difficult. It takes a long time – if at all possible. Maybe for the coming generation. What is European Citizenship? We do not know about that – has it something to do with EU?

We know that we have human rights – and also that there is duty connected to that. And of course you have to show responsibility – sometimes the authorities expect more responsibility because you are not Danish.

Question C

Yes we have taken classes in the Danish language. But not classes in our native tongue. We have learned very little about citizenship. And it is all very complicated because it is related to the Danish Constitution, traditions and culture. We know little about the Parliament. Things are going so fast. We feel it is difficult to take part in democracy.

We believe in the same God. But it seems to be the fact that the Christians do not know that Mohammed followed after Jesus – and that his writing has higher priority and validity.

Descendants – the second generation of refugees - from Kurdistan

These young people (aged 15 to 18) – only boys – live in the suburb called Brøndby (where 20% of the population has an ethnic background other than Danish). They have all attended basic school, and most also went to kindergarten. They speak very little Danish, and maybe they understand very little. They speak a certain mix of Danish and Turkish called *Mujaffa* – and their native tongue from Kurdistan.

It has been very difficult for the student to translate the interviews because there is so much 'in talk', more or less like argot. His interpretation of the interviews is as follows:

None of them were offered teaching in Danish when they attended kindergarten. Most of them spent most of their preschool time at home with their mothers. They do not have very good memories of kindergarten. Because of language problems they learned very little about Danish society, have very little understanding of citizenship and a rather limited common knowledge¹. Because of these circumstances they feel that they do not belong to the Danish culture. They do not regard themselves as Danish citizens. They have a very pessimistic idea of their future prospects. There were no answers to the last three questions in C.

Conclusion

No doubt the members of Parliament (with the exceptions of members of the right wing party *Dansk Folkeparti*) in general have good intentions about teaching refugees in Danish and that refugees should learn about Danish citizenship. And no doubt the Minister of Integration also has good intentions, but it seems that there is a long way to go before refugees are taught Danish and their native tongue. Since 1968 *citizenship* has more or less been a rude word, so it is very interesting that we in Denmark offer an MA in Citizenship at the universities in Copenhagen and Odense. As noted, a bill before Parliament suggests all kindergartens in Denmark should teach Danish from 1 August 2004. As in the UK and Sweden, Danes try to offer refugees a job from day one, as the

¹ Compared to what you can expect from young people living in Denmark in general. Of course, there are groups of young people with Danish background that also have a very limited common knowledge.

best way to learn about Danish society and citizenship. I think we all believe positively in this project. But there is a particular problem with young second generation refugees from some Arabic countries (Hedegaard, 2003). The minister, Bertel Haader, has not succeeded handling this problem, and his excuse is that it is not a task for his ministry but for the whole population.

There is no precise answer to the question put at the start of this paper, but of course it is discouraging that the result of the interviews are so negative. It is not only a challenge for the Ministry of Immigrants and Refugees, it is also one for the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Education.

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