

In Denmark, you earn much more as a salesperson if you are named Kasper or Katrine than Amir or Fatima. Why? Because in Denmark, people favour the **majority culture over the minority culture**, a new Danish study concludes.



Is DENMARK STILL *a fairytale* COUNTRY?

By MATHILDE WEIRSØE

* Recently, a couple of young telephone salespersons from a major Danish newspaper revealed that their boss had asked them to introduce themselves as Kasper and Katrine, even though they are actually named Amir and Fatima. Why? Because sales are presumably better, if it is a young man or woman with a Danish-sounding name on the line when Mrs. Jensen is to be persuaded to subscribe to the newspaper. But why do Amir and Fatima go along with introducing themselves under aliases? And how does this fit with the picture many people have of Denmark as a tolerant and open society?

False advertising – that is what one expert in the field says. Christian Horst is an associate professor at the Danish School of Education, Aarhus University, and a researcher in Educational Responses to Ethnic Complexity in Education. He is behind the Danish contribution to the international project on multicultural education, which the International Alliance of Leading Education Institutes (IALEI) presented in the fall of 2010. The transnational project provides a state-of-the-art picture of how things stand with multicultural education in selected countries all over the world – including Denmark.

Multicultural teaching has a low priority

In Denmark, multicultural teaching still has a low priority, the Danish national report concludes. In fact, the terms ‘multicultural’ and ‘intercultural’ cannot be found in any Danish legislation or steering documents in the area of education.

Why? According to Christian Horst, it has to do with the hegemonic discourse that articulates Danish culture as the most important and, at the same time, precludes other languages and cultures from being seen as resources in the context of education and learning theory. Recently, for example, there was a lively political debate on the extent to which Denmark can call itself a multicultural society. The debate resulted in a broad agreement across the political spectrum that concluded that Denmark is not a multicultural society, nor should it be.

“The words ‘intercultural’ and ‘multicultural’ do not exist in the Danish legislation and official circulars regulating professional education requirements. From this perspective, Denmark is a strongly nationalist society that does not recognize the presence of other cultures on an equal footing with Danish culture. In this context, it is no use for us to imagine that we are a very tolerant society, because we are not,” Christian Horst says.

He points out that, in 2006 and in 2010, Denmark was criticized by the UN’s CERD (Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination) for doing away with state support for mother tongue teaching to children of third country nationals and for not integrating ethnic complexity in the organisation of education on all levels of education.

New students in the class

According to Christian Horst, schools have a key position with respect to recognizing and including minorities. >

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✘ Denmark is world-famed for the fairytales of the author H. C. Andersen, like *The Little Mermaid* who normally sits on a stone in Copenhagen Harbour. Here she visits the Danish pavillion at Expo 2010 in Shanghai. This illustrates how Denmark is part of a global world - whether the country likes it or not.

“This is where we plant seeds in the children. This is where we teach them how to see themselves as a part of the society in which they live. If the newspaper front page tells children with a minority background that Islam is the same as criminality and terror, and the schools do not offer a nuanced counter-image that recognizes all cultures, then the children grow up with the view that the society in which they live rejects them,” Christian Horst says.

We are talking about more than 73,000 children – or 10.2 percent of all school children in Denmark. If this trend continues, ethnic complexity will only increase.

Does this mean that Islam should be on the curriculum of Danish schools instead of Christianity? Christian Horst dismisses this, saying that it is not a question of either-or but both-and.

“The student body in the schools reflects the ethnic complexity in society today. And, therefore, teaching and pedagogy must do so as well. It is no use that the Danish state schools teach as if we were a monocultural society with one language, one religion and one culture, when a significant number of the students bring with them a completely different sort of background,” Christian Horst says.

Successful education in multicultural societies requires reforms that truly incorporate multicultural pedagogy into the education system at many levels. But if teaching is to have a multicultural dimension, the teachers must first be educated to cope with the challenge. At the moment, multicultural teaching and pedagogy are not required elements of the teacher education.

“Many forces have tried to get this development going ‘from below’, i.e. teachers, pedagogues and researchers have been effective in various development projects. But such developments are very vulnerable to political trends if the initiatives are not anchored in the steering documents that form the basis for educational training. Therefore, we should start at the legislative level. From there, it should spread to the area of education for teachers and pedagogues, so multicultural pedagogy becomes an integrated part of the pedagogical work in our state schools and youth education,” Christian Horst says, adding that Denmark is limping well behind other countries (e.g. Sweden) with which Denmark is often compared in this field. In Sweden, ethnic complexity is integrated in steering documents concerning the curriculum, and in relation to language acquisition Swedish as a second language and mother tongue instruction is combined in more additive ways.


Children of ethnic minorities are doing poorly

The most recent PISA measurements have not only created controversy about the quality of Danish schools but also directed attention to the fact that there is a problem with the children of ethnic minorities in Denmark, who generally measure quite low – also lower than minority children in other European countries. In Denmark, therefore, additional PISA measurements have been carried out; a PISA measurement with special attention to the performance of ethnic minorities (PISA Ethnic) and a separate study for the Municipality of Copenhagen (PISA Copenhagen). But a PISA test is not a sufficient explanatory model, Christian Horst believes.

“The problem is that a PISA test fails to look at the school’s input side. If you were to do a medical health study of young people, you would not only look at their health status in relation to their family background and their socioeconomic circumstances, though those factors must be a part of the study. You also have to look at what they eat, how much they exercise etc. The same holds true when educational research is supposed to shed light on learning patterns. A PISA test fails to look at children’s ‘nourishment’ in the form of teaching, i.e. they do not investigate how the teaching is organized and facilitated in relation to the premises for these children compared to Danish children,” Christian Horst explains.

He further explains that this stands in sharp contrast to the reform pedagogical principles on which the teaching in Danish schools rests and which acknowledges the necessity of doing teaching that is in dialogue with the child’s own preconditions, family background and local environment.

“You cannot draw the simple conclusion that, if Fatima is not doing well at school, it must be because her mother is Turkish and her Danish language skills are not as strong



“It takes four to seven years for children to learn a second language well enough to be able to absorb information at the same level as children who are being taught in their native language. Therefore, the children of ethnic minorities are behind from the start.”

as ethnic Danish pupils. This approach is completely deficient, because we cannot fundamentally change Fatima’s premises – her parents, her history and her environment. What we can change is how the teaching is done in the schools, so it better takes into account each child’s preconditions,” Christian Horst says.

Native language is the portal to learning

One obvious place to look is native language teaching, which according to language research is essential to the learning curves of minority children. It takes four to seven years for children to learn a second language well enough to be able to absorb information at the same level as children who are being taught in their native language. Therefore, the children of ethnic minorities are behind from the start.

“We can tackle things far more constructively and see to it that the children of ethnic minorities get the same opportunities for successful schooling. It is common to think that minority children become linguistically strong in Danish if they are only taught to read and do arithmetic in Danish and not their mother tongue. Yet, from language research, we know that when the children

work in both languages they achieve the best learning results. If children must learn to read, write and do arithmetic in Danish, it is significantly more effective if their learning is linked to their native language," Christian Horst says.

Pedagogical research in the area of bilingual teaching has developed and described many different approaches to how schools can tackle native language teaching. What they have in common is that they work with learning from the child's overall linguistic premises and combine Danish as a second language and native language teaching in different ways.

The specific solutions, according to Christian Horst, are connected with the recognition of ethnic complexity in the construction of curriculum and the organization of teaching. Schools must develop different approaches to bilingual teaching from the various premises students have. This implies that some things must change in the Danish school system in order to embrace more inclusive approaches to linguistic and ethnic complexity. That will be expensive, the counter-argument goes. But, according to Christian Horst, it will be even more expensive if we do not do so.

"This is not a sudden cloud burst that will blow over. The complexity increases day by day. More and more students with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds continue to come into the Danish education system. If we measure the expenses in relation to the individual student in the short run, it may seem expensive. Yet, if the alternative is countless numbers of special teaching models, support measures and various task forces, it will be less costly and more learning-effective in the long run to implement teaching that acknowledges the preconditions of all students," Christian Horst explains. Investment in education is a long-term, cost-effective question with structural implications - and not simply an adding up of 'expenses' related to the individual child.

Learning from the debate on gender equality

So, why do Amir and Fatima go along with selling newspapers under Danish aliases? If you ask Christian Horst, it is because Denmark is approaching a state in which a 'natural' differential treatment has become legitimate. It is not the first time in Denmark's history that differential treatment has been accepted. Christian Horst draws a parallel to the history of equal rights for women:

"If you hold the view that men think predominantly logically and women predominantly emotionally, then there is no reason to give women the right to vote and, until 1915, when women won the right to vote in Denmark, the dominant discourse was that it was reasonable and correct to discriminate between men and women. And from this a 'natural' differential treatment arose. Even now, 100 years later, we are still struggling with the after-effects of this point of view. The question is whether we will learn from history or waste years and lives on making the same foolish mistakes by legitimating a 'natural' differential treatment between Kasper and Amir, because we favour majority culture over minority culture in Denmark" Christian Horst asks. ■

Why is Denmark not a multicultural society?



Is Denmark a multicultural society? The question has regularly spawned heated debates in the Danish Parliament concerning present and future political and cultural developments. In 2008, the debate resulted in a broad agreement across the political spectrum, concluding that Denmark is not a multicultural society, nor is a development towards a multicultural society to be envisaged.

Associate Professor Christian Horst has studied ethnic complexity in education and how ethnic complexity is recognised in the area of educational legislation. He reports that the words 'intercultural' and 'multicultural' do not appear in the Danish legislation and official circulars that regulate education in primary and secondary school. When former Minister of Education Bertel Haarder was asked in Parliament whether any institutions related to the Ministry of Education serve the purpose of promoting a multicultural

school, he provided this written reply (March 22, 2007):

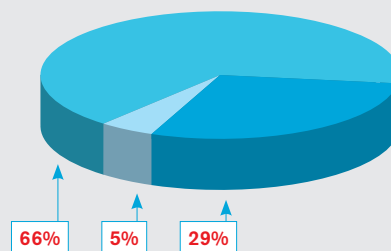
"No council and no institution with relation to the Ministry of Education serve the purpose of furthering a multicultural state school."

To the question whether Denmark has signed international documents that oblige Denmark to bring up or educate children for a multicultural society, he replied (March 16, 2007):

"International obligations do not imply that Danish students are to be educated for a multicultural society."

According to Christian Horst, the rejection of multicultural perspectives has led to confrontations with international human rights, i.e. the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) in 2006 and 2010.

In 2004, the National Competence Accounts (Det Nationale Kompetenceregnskab) researched and evaluated the 'intercultural competence' of the Danish people. This competence was defined as the "ability to understand cultural complexity and to participate in a dialogue with other cultures without prejudice". The National Competence Accounts found that the Danish population scores very poorly when it comes to intercultural competence:



66% of the population has a low degree of intercultural competence. 29% of the population has a middle score. 5% of the population has a high intercultural competence.

This has not led to initiatives to promote intercultural competence in education in Denmark.



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