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# **Addressing diversity in schools through dialogue and compromise**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article evaluates a decentralized Danish model for dealing with cultural and religious diversity at individual schools. This evaluation is based upon normative theories of toleration, recognition and domination and examines whether the model implies compromise with the (liberal) educational values stipulated in the national legislation. The model, reconstructed from government publications, is based on reaching accommodation through dialogue between school staff and parents/students, with the pragmatic aim of facilitating the participation of students in everyday school activities. The model is noteworthy because it appears to break with the widespread 'retreat from multiculturalism' predicated on the defence of liberal values, and because properly dealing with diversity at schools is important for ensuring students' well-being and academic success.

**Key words:** education, religious diversity, toleration, non-domination, compromise

## Introduction

Accommodating religious and cultural diversity in schools is an important issue around the world. In Europe, the presence of both old and new minorities has spurred efforts to develop multicultural and intercultural education. These efforts aim to improve relations between groups in society, raise the educational attainment of minorities, provide language support and equip students with the intercultural competences required to live in diverse societies (Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2004; Luciak, 2006). Dealing with diversity in school settings also implies dealing with cultural and religious differences in everyday school matters, i.e. in the organization of classes, teaching, and practical matters regarding food, holidays, provision for religious interests, dressing rooms, excursions and so on. Getting these things right is central for ensuring the academic success and welfare of both majority and minority students, and for obtaining the support and involvement of parents in the education of their children.

This article evaluates a Danish dialogue-based model for dealing with diversity that has been reconstructed here on the basis of government publications and the fundamental legal and organisational structure of the Danish public school system. The reconstruction is supported by background interviews with people working with education policy implementation at different levels. The model is reconstructed in order to relate it to the general discussion about how to approach cultural and religious diversity in everyday school operations, either through rejection (e.g. prohibition), toleration (negative and/or critical acceptance) or recognition (positive acceptance or appreciation) (e.g. Galeotti, 2002, ch 4; Lægaard, 2010; Jones, 2010). The evaluation of the model is made in relation to these concepts and in relation to two of the model's main features. The first feature is that it is based on *dialogue*: through dialogue, school staff, students and parents are to find solutions that can accommodate diversity to the degree necessary to facilitate student participation and well-being as well as receive support from their parents. The second feature is *hierarchy*: schools, staff, students and parents work and interact within the limits set by national regulations, which stipulate that certain values should be inculcated in students and that various educational targets should be achieved. Moreover, school staff have both a formal and an informal authority that students and

parents do not have: school staff are authorized to make decisions about school activities and have a professional educational expertise that students and (most) parents do not. Dialogue implies equality between speaking partners and the absence of domination, but hierarchy appears to contradict this. Similarly, negotiating the accommodation of diversity through dialogue might be at odds with the official values that schools are to represent and transmit to students according to national regulations. This raises the question of whether schools can compromise on these values in their accommodation of diversity, and if so, how. This model will thus be discussed, first, in relation to the concepts of rejection, toleration and recognition of diversity; second, in relation to equality and domination between dialogue partners; and third, in relation to whether and how schools may compromise with the official values of the national legislation.

The model is important to discuss for three related reasons. The first is that dealing with diversity in everyday school life is crucial for the wellbeing and educational success of all students. Second, the possibility of accommodating cultural and religious diversity in everyday school life as the result of dialogue between school staff and students/parents appears to contradict the ‘retreat from multiculturalism’ that has taken place at the political level in many western countries, including Denmark, both within and outside of education politics (Joppke, 2004; Triadafilopoulos, 2011; Olsen, 2016). The retreat from multiculturalism is based on a concern that multiculturalism will undermine social cohesion and endanger the fundamental values of liberal democratic states. Third, accommodation of diversity hence raises normative questions, not least with regard to the extent to which it results in unjustifiable compromises with such fundamental values.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section explains the method through which the model has been reconstructed. It also explains the structure of the ensuing evaluation of the model. The second section reconstructs the model and outlines its basic features. The third, fourth and fifth sections discuss the pros and cons of the model in relation to the concepts of a) toleration and recognition, b) equality and domination and c) official values and compromise.

### **Model reconstruction and evaluation**

The model has been reconstructed predominantly on the basis of four publications from the Ministries of Education and Integration (Ministry of Education, 2003; 2008; Navigent, 2008; Ministry of Integration, 2010). In this material, the existing legal and organisational structure of the Danish public school system is taken for granted, and this structure therefore forms part of the reconstructed model. This material has been supplemented with background interviews with people working with the implementation of Danish education policy regarding how the school sector deals with diversity in its everyday practices.<sup>1</sup>

The point of *reconstruction* is that the above-mentioned publications, combined with the underlying presumptions about the structure of the public school system, do not explicitly present the reader with a coherent model for dealing with diversity. The publications are very concrete and provide various suggestions for exercises to be used in staff training, with students as part of teaching in class and in connection with meetings with parents. They are presented as the result of innovation projects carried out at particular schools around the country and as experiences of best practices. They are informed by various theoretical approaches, such as non-essentialist conceptions of culture, theories of conflict (de-)escalation, ‘appreciative dialogue’ (Ministry of Education, 2008), and ‘appreciative inquiry’ (Navigent, 2008; Ministry of Integration, 2010), but no general theory explicitly serves to tie together all these elements. Reconstruction is therefore based on asking the question of *what would be* the most coherent and general account of the way that these publications describe how best to deal with diversity among students and parents in everyday school matters. Reconstruction is thus understood as an interpretative method that aims to make explicit the underlying principles and assumptions in the material in the most coherent manner possible. At the same time, the reconstruction is undertaken with a view to discussing the reconstructed model in relation to the concepts of toleration and recognition of cultural and religious differences. This means that the model is seen through the ‘theoretical lenses’ provided by these concepts.

As with any interpretation, there is a certain ‘surplus of meaning’ which cannot easily be assimilated into the overall interpretation. This is accentuated in the present case, as the model is not deduced from a set of internally consistent principles, but read inductively off of a collection of ideas and

suggested practices which originate from practitioners rather than theorists. Moreover, the model as it is reconstructed here contains certain tensions. These tensions mostly relate to the contradiction between the principle of *dialogue* between equal speaking partners on the one hand and *hierarchy* on the other.

Given that the model is reconstructed in this manner, one might object to calling it a ‘model’ to begin with. It could be argued that a better term would be ‘approach’, i.e. as a way of considering or handling a problem. However, ‘model’ is used here for two reasons. First, the reconstruction aims to describe the model as concretely as possible; that is, by moving beyond the more general nature of an approach. Second, as mentioned, the studied material contains very specific items, such as exercises for school staff, students and parents. The material is very ‘hands-on’ and therefore constitutes something that is closer to a model than to an approach.

The main purpose of this article is to evaluate the model. This means that the reconstruction of the model which takes up the first part of the article is rather brief and that not all claims regarding the nature of the model are meticulously documented here. Moreover, given that the analysis is a reconstruction, it fills out some of ‘the missing pieces’ of the model by inferring them from the pieces (data) that are available. Missing pieces cannot be documented directly. However, the article will provide quotes and examples to back up its main claims regarding the nature of the model. For the sake of simplicity and for reasons that will become clear below, the model will be called ‘the model of appreciative dialogue’. It is important to note that this article *does not claim* that this is *the* Danish model for dealing with diversity at schools. It only claims that such a model can be reconstructed from the above-mentioned material.<sup>2</sup>

The article’s second part evaluates the model. Evaluations are always normative since they are relative to specific goals, values or principles. As mentioned, the present discussion takes its starting point in theories on the concepts of toleration and recognition in order to establish whether the model represents an appropriate response to handling diversity, i.e. the stated purpose of most of the ideas and suggested practices contained the studied publications. The discussion then turns to discussing the

two main features of the model, namely, first, the relationship between dialogue, equality and domination; and second, the legitimacy of compromising on the official values set out for the school system at the national level by democratically elected representatives. In each case, the article takes a necessary step back into to the relevant normative literature on these concepts to set out some minimal premises for the discussion.

### **Decentralized appreciative dialogues about diversity at school**

As explained above, the material from which the model is reconstructed takes the structure of the Danish public school system as given, and as such this structure forms part of the model. This section first sets out the basic structure of the school system before it turns to the more specific features of the model regarding dialogue and accommodation of diversity.

The Danish school system for primary and lower secondary education (grades 0 to 10, total of 11 grades) is characterized by a significant degree of decentralization (although centralization has certainly increased in recent years (Kofod, 2009)). In terms of curriculum, the national legislation establishes general targets that should be reached at different grades, but the content of specific subjects (e.g. Danish, math) and hence what is needed in order to reach the educational targets is not closely specified at the national level. This is left to individual schools to determine, and to a large extent it is decided by the individual teachers. Organizationally, the public schools are run by the 98 municipalities in Denmark, which are responsible for ensuring the right to free education for all children in the municipality. Municipalities decide on the overall school budget, including the number of schools and school districts, the number of children in classes and the number of school days. As mentioned, every school has a school board with representatives drawn from among staff, parents and students, and may also include local stakeholders from business, sports associations and so on. Moreover, the parents are obligated to participate in school-home cooperation, as stipulated in the law on public schools: ‘Students and parents cooperate with the school to realize the aims of the public school’ (Folkeskoleloven, 2015, Article 2.3). This is effected through the school boards, through parent participation in individual dialogues about their children’s educational progress and behaviour

in school and through collective meetings and activities involving all parents in a class. There is hence an expectation that parents are involved in and actively support the educational activities of their children in conjunction with the school and its staff.

The model for dealing with diversity is developed on the basis of this structure, and it furthermore builds on the notion that there are certain values, dispositions and skills that students need to acquire through public school attendance. Local autonomy and dialogue do not imply that all things are up for discussion (Ministry of Education, 2003, pp. 8, 21). However, the presumption in the model is that there are a number of different ways in which students can acquire values, dispositions and skills through the structuring of everyday school life. In addition, parents (and students) have to be included in the discussion of how the school day and classes are structured to ensure optimal participation in educational activities (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 18; Ministry of Integration, 2010, pp. 8-9). The Danish legislation on the public school (*Folkeskoleloven*) stipulates values pertaining to personal development and autonomy, *Bildung*, and political values pertaining to democracy and the fundamental rights of persons – not least the exercise of political/democratic autonomy (Folkeskoleloven, 2015, Article 1). These are values that students should learn in school and that they should practice in school life (Ministry of Integration, 2010, p. 10).

Moreover, individual schools (school boards in conjunction with the school director) are to establish their own value and norm sets. They are to further the general aims set out in the national public school regulations and specifically ensure respectful relations among students and between students and staff (Folkeskoleloven, 2015, Article 44.4). The accommodation that is envisaged in the model emphasizes that accommodations should be in line with these official value and norm sets (and the general aims of public schools more broadly), including the notions that students are required to ‘take responsibility for their own learning’, ‘that the school is based on student democracy and co-determination’ and that the ‘students are expected to express their views’ (Ministry of Integration, 2010, p. 10).

Parent-school cooperation takes centre stage in the discussion about accommodation. Possible accommodations of cultural and religious concerns can be made in connection with, for example, cooking classes (selection of meat, taking the produced food home and eating it after sunset), gym classes (showering while clothed<sup>2</sup>), sex education (separate classes for boys and girls), school excursions (separate sleeping arrangements, food selection, no alcohol) and in connection with religious holidays, exempting students from school and planning key school events accordingly (Ministry of Education, 2003, pp. 27-43). These are examples of potential results of processes of accommodation. However, it is also emphasized that the process through which accommodation is agreed/achieved is important and needs to have a specific quality (Ministry of Integration, 2010, pp. 11-12). Again, a key idea is that parents are to be actively involved in the education of their children and that there should be ongoing cooperation between parents and the school. Parents who are not accustomed to this type of collaboration are expected to adapt to it (Ministry of Integration, 2010, pp. 12-3).

The responsibility of initiating a dialogue lies with the school staff (Ministry of Integration, 2010, pp. 6-7). In this context, they are to be very attentive to formal and informal power and status inequalities that may affect the dialogue, and more specifically to how ways of speaking can establish equality, open the dialogue to new ideas, expand the opportunities for action and communicate respect (Ministry of Integration, 2010, p. 12). A key notion is also that recognizing or respecting parents as equal speaking partners in itself contributes significantly to reaching agreement. The fact that parents feel that they are being heard and taken seriously increases their willingness to venture into agreements that will facilitate the participation of their children in school activities, giving them the required learning and school experiences (Ministry of Integration, 2010, pp. 11, 18; Navigent, 2008, p. 13; Ministry of Education, 2003, pp. 15-6).

The material outlining the model emphasizes the fact that matters of school and education can be controversial and sensitive because they involve different perceptions of what school and schooling are and because education regards key values relating to identity formation and personal development (Ministry of Education, 2003, pp. 21-3). However, the model deliberately places emphasis on practical

matters, downplaying discussions of identity and fundamental values (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 15). School staff are also to remember that not all conflicts with minority parents automatically originate in cultural or religious differences, but may just as well come from social sources or the personalities or personal problems of particular parents (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 15).

The envisaged ‘appreciative dialogue’ is based on equal respect and the notion that parents and schools have a mutual interest in reaching a common understanding of the individual child as a student in order to further the child’s academic success.

The purpose of school-parent cooperation is to unite the school’s and the parents’ views on the child and achieve a common understanding of the child as a student (Ministry of Integration, 2010, p. 11, *own translation*).

The dialogue thus has one overriding purpose: the education and well-being of the child. The appreciative dialogue can ensure mutual respect if carried out in the proper manner:

Parents and teachers have different roles and see the child from their respective perspectives. Mutual respect is a critical condition for good cooperation. Parents want to be respected for the values they give to their child and for their effort to raise the child in such a way that he/she will be able to take care of him/herself as an adult. Parents are emotionally tied to their child and view the child from experiences and contexts which include much more than just the child’s school life. Teachers want to be respected for their competence as teachers. The teacher is the professional who sees the child as a student and as part of a bigger group of students (Ministry of Integration, 2010, p. 11, *own translation*).

The appreciative dialogue is based on the notion of focusing on future-directed actions and possibilities rather than on identities and problems. It is seen as a dialogue in which mutual recognition of others as equals is established and where differences in views are recognized (Ministry of Integration, 2010, p. 11). The dialogue is intended to establish relations between the staff and the parents, transforming the relations and the field available for action. School staff are advised that it

should be made clear that parents should be able to contradict the teacher and express disagreements. The focus should be on dialogue and concrete issues and not (just) on the transmission of information from teacher to parent. Similarly, it is underlined that ‘speaking inclusively’ precludes expressions such as ‘This is how we do it in Denmark’ (Ministry of Integration, 2010, p. 18). The dialogue model is hence based on a principled reluctance to stipulate non-negotiable values and norms, despite the fact that the Danish legislation on primary and lower secondary education, as mentioned, does stipulate some general values and competences that the public school must teach children.

Moreover, appreciative dialogue is based on a number of principles and steps which rest on the idea that the truth must emerge as a result of negotiations between different perspectives, none of which can be said to be correct or true to begin with (Navigent, 2008, pp. 9-10). The parents must be accepted and recognized with a view to developing mutual respect:

When you understand and accept the parents, it is also possible to recognise and appreciate them. Even if they have different worldviews and convictions from your own, you can talk about this with them and create the possibility of changing certain things, simply because they feel recognised (Navigent, 2008, p. 13, *own translation*).

Recognition is thought to lead to mutual respect, and this entails recognizing and respecting the differences among parents and teachers. Teachers are told that this is important to remember in order to avoid the risk that ‘integration takes place as cultural adaptation, where some people are incorporated [assimilated] into your culture and the dialogue takes place on your premises’ (Navigent, 2008, pp. 12-13).

The model is thus oriented towards openness and equality, but as mentioned there are limits to its openness and equality. These lie, first, in the general aims and educational targets of public school education which are given from the outset and, second, in the (formal) hierarchy in the school context between school staff and parents/students. Teachers and directors are the professional educators, certified and hired to make decisions about how best to reach educational targets. The model recognizes this and, as mentioned, also points out that there are limits to what can be accepted or even

entertained as possibilities in terms of accommodation. What is characteristic, however, is that instead of pure rejection and highlighting differences of principle, focus should still be on creating possibilities for future action and finding solutions to concrete problems regarding participation in educational activities:

Acceptance is impossible in those rare cases when stances taken by parents are in conflict with the law or our society's fundamental values of democracy, gender equality, freedom of religion, etc. Here it is necessary for you as a teacher to hold your ground--but to do it in an appreciative manner. Ask what it is the parents wish for, what they hope for and dream about, and go from there instead of problematizing their statements (Navigent, 2008, p. 12, *own translation*).

The model thus aims to recognize and respect parents as equal partners in solving problems relating to school attendance and to take them seriously in finding accommodations that will facilitate their cooperation with the school and their child's participation in educational activities. It seeks to avoid unilateral assimilation and authoritative stipulation of non-negotiable truths and values. On the other hand, it still operates on the basis of educational values and targets which are set by national legislators, and on the basis of a professional hierarchy where the school staff is formally empowered to make decisions about the educational activities of students.

To summarize, the model of appreciative dialogue is based on accommodation of diversity through dialogue between school staff and parents/students. School staff has the responsibility of initiating the dialogue and structuring it in such a manner that reciprocal respect and appreciation of each other as valuable speaking partners becomes possible. This process of dialogue itself, not only its results, is important. A dialogue can be established on the basis of pragmatic accommodation of diversity and can result in accommodation of diversity. Accommodation can thus be tailored to the specific circumstances of individual students, parents and schools. Nevertheless, there is not full equality between speaking partners due to the formal and professional authority of school staff. School staff can only try to level this difference in power by making sure that parents/students can speak freely, air

criticisms and make their own suggestions. Moreover, the educational targets and values of the national legislation are taken as givens. Accommodation aims to enable the well-being of students and their participation – with the support of their parents – in educational activities. It is not supposed to displace or change educational targets and values and can only take place within the limits of these two elements.

The model raises the question of whether this is the right approach to dealing with difference; in other words, whether it is likely to attain its purpose. The model also raises questions as to what extent it can ensure appropriate conditions for a genuine dialogue. A central aspect of this is whether it can guarantee, in light of a decentralized school system, that parents (and students) will always be invited to dialogues which will take their interests into consideration. Finally, the model raises the concern that pragmatic accommodation will lead to compromises with the core values of the education system. The following three sections discuss these three issues in turn.

### **The mode of toleration in everyday school life**

As mentioned, the model emphasizes practical solutions to problems in order to accommodate the concerns of various parties, while downplaying deep value conflicts, principles and identities. It does not necessarily presume that values or identities are in conflict and irreconcilable, but it does not rely on the notion that the dialogue should necessarily end in changes of value systems and worldviews, and even less in shared values and worldviews.

Nonetheless, even though the model tries to avoid open conflicts, it foresees an occasional need for toleration with regard to certain values and practices. This section will discuss whether the model's approach to diversity is appropriate. It will do so on the basis of the normative literature on toleration and recognition – two key principles for dealing with cultural and religious diversity. Toleration has been criticised for being an inappropriate concept for dealing with difference, not least in everyday interaction contexts like schools because it implies a negative stance towards others (Galeotti, 2002, 2006). Moreover, it has been argued that misrecognition of the worth of cultures or specific identities can be very damaging to the self-worth of different groups (Taylor, 1994; Modood, 2007).

Nonetheless, it might be difficult to move beyond toleration when there are genuine contradictions and conflicts of value. On the other hand, toleration may be combined with a duty to engage positively with that which one tolerates, thereby mitigating the effect of the negative stance entailed in toleration.

But what is toleration? In short, toleration rests on the notion that one thinks that there are good reasons to object to a certain belief or practice, but even better or overriding reasons not to reject, coercively eliminate or prohibit it (McKinnon, 2006; Forst, 2008). Reasons for toleration can be pragmatic (e.g. peace, social order) or principled (e.g. respect for others as equals). The reason for toleration in the case of the model discussed here is the reciprocal respect for the other parties as social (and political) equals with the right to make their own (even wrong) choices concerning the conception of the good, child rearing, etc., and in part a pragmatic consideration regarding the primary matter at hand, namely the need to ensure the education and welfare of the individual student through participation in school activities.

Galeotti (2006) has criticized the liberal conception of toleration for not providing proper inclusion of certain minorities. Identities which are regarded negatively and do not fit the conventional distinction between public and private are excluded from what is considered normal to the detriment of their holders, who end up as second-class citizens. According to Galeotti, negative differences can only be turned into positive ones by expanding toleration to include a form of recognition, i.e. ‘the acceptance and hence the inclusion of a different trait, practice or identity in the range of the legitimate, viable, “normal” options of an open society’ (Galeotti, 2006, p. 574). As a consequence, toleration is questioned as an appropriate concept in a school setting, where people have to interact on a close and continuous basis, since toleration implies a general negative attitude towards the beliefs and practices of others (Galeotti, 2002, ch. 4; cf. Lægaard, 2010).

However, the model discussed here does not imply that the reaction to possible instances of toleration should be an openly negative stance against the difference with which one party, in particular the school staff, disagrees. In the model, direct, negative utterances (linguistic and non-linguistic) are generally to be withheld (cf. Jones, 2010, pp. 44-45). Indeed, advocates of this model pair toleration

with principled curiosity, i.e. to ‘hold your ground ... in an appreciative manner’ (cf. the quote above; Olsen & Ahlgren, 2011, pp. 23-24). This can be seen as a combination of toleration with ‘a willingness to listen and learn’ (Walzer, 1997, p. 11). Moreover, the model does, to a certain extent, expand the range of what is considered normal. It does not rely on strong preconceptions of what is inside or outside the range of legitimate positions, beliefs and practices and hence of what can be engaged with. The viewpoints of parents and students are to be taken seriously and in an open-minded manner.

Still, however, the model does not in itself move beyond respect and toleration (cf. Dobbernack & Modood, 2013). The respect on which it is based concerns others as equals with the right to make (potentially wrong) choices for themselves and not (necessarily) the content of those choices. Nor is there an immediate concern for bestowing differential statuses (e.g. negative, positive, normal) on the various identities and life choices of those involved. This also means it will disappoint more ambitious approaches to move beyond toleration and towards positive recognition. Some multiculturalists have argued for the need to positively recognize cultures and/or identities in order to ensure equality and avoid human suffering and second-class citizenship (Taylor, 1994; Modood, 2007). Of course, there may be something akin to a presumption of worth of culture at work in this model. To Taylor, this presumption is something we owe every culture (Taylor, 1994, p. 66). However, although the model relies on openness to new perspectives and spaces for action in its future directedness, it is not the kind of deep hermeneutical engagement that is required for verifying the worth of cultures and for obtaining the concomitant fusion of horizons (Taylor, 1994, p. 67). Nor does it rely on a civic principle of positive recognition, which implies working actively to turn the negative and stigmatic status of some (non-European) identities ‘into a positive feature of the societies of which they are now a part’ (Modood, 2007, p. 43). This would require keeping identities and higher principles on the agenda, since positive recognition demands that such issues are addressed directly (Jones, 2006). Yet the model specifically downplays such matters. Positive recognition would therefore only be the happy but unlikely by-product of dialogue.

To summarize, the model does not aim to recognize specific cultural or religious differences for either instrumental reasons or for reasons of their intrinsic worth. It will therefore disappoint aspirations to move beyond toleration. On the other hand, the model implies that negative criticisms of identities and values are to be withheld and that toleration is combined with a principled curiosity. In this sense it seeks to circumvent the negative consequences of toleration in terms of exclusion and the perception of being a second-class member of the community. Furthermore, the focus on practical matters is better suited to solving problems in circumstances of deep conflict, should they occur. In such cases, focus on values and identity risks escalating the conflict, especially where people identify themselves in antagonistic opposition to each other and thereby generate unbridgeable differences across which finding solutions becomes very difficult (Dryzek, 2005).

### **Equality, power and domination**

In the model of appreciative dialogue, the accommodation of diversity takes place through a form of dialogue which should take seriously the views of all involved: school staff, students and parents. Theories of deliberation and ideal dialogue conditions tell us that in dialogue, speaking partners should have equal rights of participation in the acceptance or rejection of claims and proposals from other participants. This means that all forms of power except the force of the better argument (identified through the dialogue itself) should be equalized (Habermas, 1990; Benhabib, 2013). As explained above, in addition to the feature of *dialogue*, the model of appreciative dialogue is based on *hierarchy*. Hierarchy results from the national regulation that sets out educational targets for schools and equips school staff with the formal authority to structure educational activities. In addition to this, the model is based on a decentralized Danish school system which currently leaves considerable discretion to individual schools, including in whether and how to approach diversity challenges. Given the tension between dialogue on the one hand and hierarchy on the other, this section will discuss how well the model of appreciative dialogue is able guarantee the right kind of dialogue participation from all parties. The section will first briefly consider whether and how equality can be achieved before it turns to discussing the challenges that come from decentralization. In this latter part, the key concepts are domination and non-domination (Pettit, 1997).

While inequality between staff and parents/students could be seen as a drawback of the model, complete equality cannot be achieved at the level of policy implementation. The primary reason for this is that it would undermine the force of the national regulation and push aside the legitimate authority of the national legislature to set educational targets for students. The model of appreciative dialogue seems to reflect this. In the model, it is not questioned that certain educational targets should be reached and that schools are entitled to seek to inculcate certain values in their students. However, at the level of interaction between school staff and parents/students, the model prescribes that school staff should try to level the power inequality as much as possible. The model recommends that school staff do not speak as authorities by positing their own view as ‘the truth’ when they engage with parents and by not demanding that minorities assimilate themselves to ‘how things are done in here in Denmark’. They should make students and parents feel that they are valuable speaking partners whose views are taken seriously. Here the model thus seems to find a reasonable balance between dialogue and hierarchy.

A bigger worry would be that a decentralized school system which leaves to the schools’ own discretion whether and how to deal with diversity would fail to ensure the participatory right that parents and students need in order to have their views taken seriously. On the one hand, decentralisation and school autonomy are preconditions for being able to accommodate diversity according to the circumstances that apply locally. On the other hand, decentralisation and autonomy create a lower degree of certainty about rights for all involved, not least for parents and students. The key concern here can be formulated more accurately in terms of domination and non-domination. Domination obtains when some people ‘have the capacity to interfere on an arbitrary basis in certain choices’ that other people are ‘in a position to make’ (Pettit, 1997, p. 52). Arbitrariness occurs when there is no tracking of the interests of those affected by the decision or non-decision to interfere. This means that an act of interference is ‘non-arbitrary to the extent that it is forced to track the interests and ideas of the person suffering the interference’ (Pettit, 1997, p. 55). The standard example is the relationship between the benevolent slave owner and the slave. Even if the slave has the same freedom as the slave owner or as a free person, the fact that the slave owner is entitled to interfere at will with

the choices of the slave means that the slave is dominated (Pettit, 1997, pp. 22-23). Examples of domination in school settings could be the extent to which individual schools allow students to pray on school grounds or the extent to which they take religious holidays into consideration when scheduling important events such as exams. Being left to the arbitrary will of the school management, students from religious minorities (or majorities, for that matter) would be dominated since the management would still be able to interfere arbitrarily with important choices that students (and their parents) would be able to make, e.g. pray according to their religious requirements or participate in religious festivities (cf. Hickey, 2009).

The model of appreciative dialogue would be able to meet Pettit's criteria for non-domination since the model aims to track the diversity of interests of parents and students. It would reduce the level of arbitrariness and domination that would occur at individual schools due to local autonomy and flexibility. The precondition for combining non-domination with local autonomy, however, is that the model of appreciative dialogue is combined with a requirement that school staff always seek to engage in this manner with parents and students. If it is left to each school individually to decide whether they want to address matters of cultural and religious differences, the potential for domination remains. It can only be avoided if local autonomy is combined with procedural participatory rights that guarantee parents and students that the school will track their interests through dialogue.

To summarize, the model of appreciative dialogue contains a tension between equality of dialogue participation and the hierarchy established by the legal framework within which dialogue takes place. However, the model strikes an appropriate balance between hierarchy and equality in that school staff should level power equalities by engaging with parents and students in a non-hierarchical way. The further concern that decentralization and school autonomy will lead to domination of minority students and parents can be avoided by emphasising that the procedural rights implicit in the model of appreciative dialogue should be consistently applied by all schools.

### **Compromising on official values**

The national legislation on educational targets and values is the basis for the work of schools. As discussed in the previous section, decentralization and school autonomy allow for accommodation of diversity. However, accommodation raises the question of whether schools might risk making illegitimate compromises with the official educational targets and values contained in the legislation. This section will discuss whether this applies to the model of appreciative dialogue. It begins by setting out the theoretical premises for the discussion.

Compromise is an agreement between conflictual positions which none of the parties sees as ideal and which does not resolve the underlying conflict but which both parties still prefer over the status quo (Bellamy et al., 2012). Compromise takes toleration as defined above one step further in that compromise means that one participates more or less actively in the accommodation of interests and values that one finds objectionable; it is not simply the 'live and let live' attitude of the most basic form of toleration (Gutmann & Thompson, 2012, p. 110). The literature distinguishes between compromises on *interests* and compromises on *values* or principles (Benditt, 1979). *Compromise on interests* implies the recognition of the legitimacy of the interests (including the needs) of the other party, who is regarded as an equal, and is constituted by agreements where it is possible to split resources such as space, time and money between the various interests at stake (Benditt, 1979, p. 31). *Compromises on values* are more demanding, and some would even argue that compromising on values entails a misunderstanding of their nature (e.g. Habermas, 2006). However, compromises on values are agreements where the parties agree to second-bests, leave aside some of their respective values to concentrate on those they have in common, or ensure support of the values of both parties that do not in theory or practice directly contradict one another (Lepora, 2012). Compromises on values may also be facilitated by a different balance of values in different contexts or situations (Benditt, 1979, pp. 34-36).

Proponents of compromise often point to the impossibility of reaching consensus in real-life contexts where time is limited and where world perspectives as well as values are widely diverging or incommensurable (Bellamy, 1999; Bohman, 1996; Gutmann & Thompson, 2012). Pragmatic reasons for compromise include the possibility that compromise might induce inclusion, cooperation and

continued communication between parties (May, 2005), while principled reasons for compromise rest on respect for the other party, the epistemic uncertainty of one's own position and the obligation to ensure a (political) community in which the winner does not take all (Weinstock, 2013). In the most demanding versions of compromise, compromise entails recognition of the values of the other party's position as morally important to them and a willingness to include those values in a common framework (Bohman, 1996; Bohman & Richardson, 2009; Bellamy, 1999).

Compromise on values makes one (in light of one's own values) guilty of omissions and, in the worst case, responsible for contributing to wrongdoing (Lepora, 2012). These omissions and any wrongdoing relate to the question of the limits of compromise, i.e. with what and with whom one may compromise. Different authors have offered different principles to define the limits on with whom and on what basis one can venture into compromises. A predominant thought is that a commitment to reciprocity and the deployment of reasons that others would be able to accept are basic requirements for making compromises. This indicates mutual respect (e.g. Gutmann & Thompson, 2010, 2012). Others have argued that under conditions of deep diversity, the limit should be set with those who are committed in practice to maintaining a deliberating community based on political equality and inclusion (Bohman, 2003, 1995; Bohman & Richardson, 2009). Margalit (2005, pp. 207-208) sets the limit at 'absolute evil' or 'systematic cruelty and human humiliation' and those representing it (e.g. Hitler/the Nazi regime or race-based slavery).

Returning to the model of appreciative dialogue, this model recognizes parents as parties with whom compromises may legitimately be entered into. There is no expectation that parents must profess specific values or principles from the outset, i.e. to establish that they are the right kind of people. Even in cases where there is an explicit rejection of society's fundamental values, the model advocates that school staff try to find ways of moving forward together with the parents. In a sense, school staff is to accept parents as they are and not necessarily as they ideally should be. Moreover, it is the obligation of school staff to initiate dialogue and hence attempt to create a deliberating community between themselves and the parents. Ultimately, what matters is that parents continue to participate in (the deliberation about) the education of their children.

The model is hence rather open regarding with *whom* school staff can venture into compromise. It is much less open with regard to *what* can be compromised on. Here the focus on practical solutions to participation in educational activities is important. Compromises can be made with regard to various *interests* that relate to the organization of the school day and educational activities, but not to the *values* that are contained in the national legislation. From the viewpoint of school staff, compromises should be regarded as practical accommodations of parents and students which serve to ensure the well-being and participation of students in educational activities. This can be done to improve a status quo that consists of either no participation (i.e. the imminent exit from school by the student) or (recalcitrant) participation not supported (or obstructed) by parents. At the level of content, the model thus appears to fall far short of the aspiration of proponents of deliberative or negotiated compromise, since this requires some measure of reciprocal recognition of the values and identities of others, at least as important values *for them* (Bohman, 1995, 1996, 2003; Bellamy, 1999). This mirrors the above discussion about the possibility of moving beyond toleration and towards positive recognition of what some (including adherents of the official values stipulated in the law) would consider to be objectionable differences.

Interpreted in this manner, the accommodations reached through appreciative dialogue must be framed in a specific way. They cannot, according to the model, be framed as a compromise with the official values of the public school. The question is whether this is a reasonable approach. On the one hand, a rigid framing might exclude claims about values and identity that parents and students find important to bring to bear in discussions and solutions; they may want their fundamental values and identity recognized. On the other hand, this framing may facilitate reaching solutions without generating further division through making more explicit any fundamental (potentially antagonistic) differences regarding values and identities. Additionally, the appreciative dialogue does not aim to replace or resemble the democratic contestations and deliberations that take place in the public sphere in general, but rather is a tool to ensure the wellbeing and participation of students in educational activities. On balance, then, the advantages of the model are greater than its drawbacks.

That said, it should be acknowledged that accommodations of interests in some instances risk becoming illegitimate compromises on values. This is the case if there is a very comprehensive specification of what a value implies, e.g. gender equality. If there is only one very specific way to realize a given value, there will be no space for accommodations. However, while theoretically possible, it is implausible that any legislator, not least a legislator within a decentralized system, would want to work with such comprehensive specification of values, since it would undermine decentralization and school autonomy. Furthermore, whether accommodations compromise official values depends on their further consequences in a specific context. Take the example of freedom of religion: to allow students to pray on school grounds and to provide them with a space reserved for that purpose in order to cater to their freedom of religious expression would in some contexts not be a problem for other students and *their* religious freedom, while in other contexts, with a different student body composition, it might lead to strong peer pressure to observe religious rules and rituals against the wishes of some students (cf. Rubin, 2012).

To sum up, accommodation of diversity may imply compromises. The model of appreciative dialogue does not set limits as to with whom compromises may be made, but would restrict these compromises to those on interests where the needs of parents and students can be met by allotting and dividing resources such as space, time and money in connection with the organization of the school day and teaching activities. From the viewpoint of the school, accommodation can only be accommodation of interests. While this may frustrate claims to recognition of identity and values by some parents/students, the argument in favour is that it rightly belongs to the national legislator to decide which values should be taught in the public school.

## **Conclusion**

The accommodation of cultural and religious diversity in education is an important issue that affects the well-being and academic success of both majority and minority students. Concepts of intercultural and multicultural education have been developed in Europe to ensure good working relations between groups and to enhance understanding and academic attainment. The model of appreciative dialogue

between school staff and parents/students aims to find practical solutions to diversity issues that will ensure the well-being and continued participation of students in educational activities. The model is striking in that it seems to be at odds with the retreat from multiculturalism found at the level of politics and formal policy in many western countries, including Denmark.

On the one hand, this model seeks to facilitate accommodation that fits local circumstances, taking into account how different forms of accommodation would have different effects, depending on the context. It is also well-suited to finding solutions to challenges arising from diversity even when there might be deep division on values and identity between the official values of the public school as established through national legislation and those of parents/students. The model downplays the focus on values and identity and excludes explicit compromises on the nationally defined values and educational targets. It thereby seems to dampen some of the concerns underlying the retreat from multiculturalism. Where the values of parents/students are objectionable from the viewpoint of official values and generally established norms, the model implies toleration. However, toleration is not supposed to result in public statements of criticism and is coupled with a principled curiosity. The model hence avoids what many have seen as the inappropriate, negative attitude generally implied by toleration.

Yet on the other hand, one of the drawbacks of the model is arguably that it will disappoint ambitions to move beyond toleration and towards positive recognition of difference, since focus on values and identities is explicitly downplayed. A more serious drawback is that it is an informal model and as such does not guarantee parents and students participatory rights which make sure that school staff tracks their interests. A full endorsement of the model should depend on making it obligatory to use in individual schools.

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## Notes

1. The background for these interviews was a public controversy regarding a Copenhagen public school (*Holbergskolen*) in February 2010. This school had invited mothers only to a meeting on bullying to ensure that mothers with immigrant backgrounds attended. The presumption on the school's side was that immigrant mothers would be reluctant to attend the meeting if there were men present. Due to a complaint by a father who felt he was being discriminated against, it became the topic of public debate. Across the political spectrum, senior politicians were outraged by what they saw as an illegitimate compromise with Danish liberal values, not least gender equality. The interviews regarded how schools in general deal with cultural and religious diversity in their everyday operations and which types of accommodation are appropriate to make. The interviews were used as background information for the present reconstruction. The following people were interviewed:

- A. Anders Balle, Chairman of the Association of School Directors, interviewed 17 March 2011
- B. Anders Bondo Christensen, Chairman of the Danish Teachers' Association, interviewed 10 May 2011
- C. Britt Vorgod Pedersen, Chairperson of the School Board of the Holberg School, interviewed 11 March 2011
- D. Carsten Dahlerup. Copenhagen School Administration, Head of the Section on Pedagogic Professionalism, interviewed 17 March 2011
- E. D. J. Copenhagen City's 'Integration Task Force', interviewed 18 February 2011 [interviewee preferred anonymity]
- F. Mette Kirk, Chairperson of the Copenhagen Parents' association 'Use the People's School', interviewed 10 March 2011
- G. Tine Fehrmann, Special Consultant, Ministry of Education, interviewed 17 March 2011.

2. The interviews mentioned in Note 1 indicate that the principles and assumptions underlying the model are fairly widespread. However, a different type of data would be needed to establish exactly how widespread they are.

3. Students typically shower naked with fellow students of the same gender since Danish changing rooms have no separate shower stalls.

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