



2018

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Recommended Citation

Schmidt, Nete (2018) "Integration Challenges and Langkær Gymnasium," *The Bridge*: Vol. 41 : No. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thebridge/vol41/iss2/7>

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Integration Challenges and Langkær Gymnasium

by
Nete Schmidt

Denmark used to be a fairly homogenous country where stereotypes of homogenous Nordic-ness could be happily and easily applied. Immigrants, often seasonal farmworkers, were invariably white. A young woman named Stefania was one of the many Poles who came to Lolland-Falster in the years 1893–1929 to work in the sugar beet fields in order to send money back to her family. She was thirteen when she arrived, with fake papers. At that time, Danish farmers and squires often hired young Polish women to do the most difficult work in the fields—weeding and harvesting the sugar beets. At the time, this was widely considered to be women’s work. The girls lived on the farms or in special housing called “Polish barracks” (*Polakkaserner*). When the season ended in the fall, most of the workers went back home, but some Poles settled, married, and became an assimilated part of the local Danish society (“De Polske Roearbejdere”). In 1940, 4,885 persons born in Poland were registered as residents (“Polske roe-arbejdere på Falster”).

In the 1960s, immigration picked up speed due to groups of immigrants from countries with fairly impoverished populations, such as Yugoslavia and Turkey, who were recruited to work in Denmark. These new immigrants were primarily men who wanted to work in order to send money back to their families in the homeland. However, the largest number of guest workers, as they were called, came from Germany because of its proximity. In 1970, this kind of guest worker contract was terminated by the Danish government (“Gæstarbejdere i Danmark”). The oil crisis in the 1970s raised the question of limiting immigration as a political issue, which was later warmly embraced by Fremskridtspartiet (The Progress Party) and Dansk Folkeparti (Danish People’s Party). Dansk Folkeparti still represents the Danes who view immigrants, lumped together with refugees, as a threat to the Danish way of life and the long-term survival of Danes themselves.

Today, Denmark has around 5,748,769 inhabitants (Jan. 1, 2017), of whom about 12.8 percent, or around 741,572 people, are either immigrants (9.9 percent) or second generation immigrants (2.9 percent) (Udlændinge- og Integrationsministeriet 2016; Danmarks Statistik 2017). These immigrants and second-generation immigrants are no longer “white,” as around 65 percent of all immigrants and second-generation immigrants are of non-western origin. Since 1980, the number of non-western immigrants residing in Denmark has increased more than sixfold (Udlændinge- og Integrationsministeriet 2016).

In recent years, public attitudes toward immigrants in Denmark have shifted away from tolerating difference and toward mandating homogeneity. In the year 2000, the public debate focused on a piece of cloth, the hijab, the scarf worn by Muslim women. In 2000, Magasin (a big department store) was sentenced to pay compensation for discriminating against a fourteen-year-old girl who had been rejected as an intern because she insisted on wearing her headscarf. Magasin lost the case because its rules regarding appropriate dress did not contain anything about headdress (*Politken* 2003). However, in 2005, the Danish Supreme Court upheld a decision made by Føtex (together with Netto and Bilka) to prohibit their employees from wearing religious scarves and headdresses during working hours (*Børsen* 2005). In 2007, a hijab-wearing Muslim woman seeking candidacy for Parliament caused the discussion to explode once again with extreme views and political attacks. One right-wing politician compared the symbolic value of the Muslim scarf with that of the Nazi swastika (Wikipedia 2017). In 2009, several bus drivers refused service to women wearing niqabs (veils covering the face and showing only the eyes) or burkas (full face and body coverings) with the reasoning that a monthly pass, including a picture, is useless as identification when the woman is completely covered and unrecognizable. The actions of the bus drivers led to charges of discrimination since Danish law prohibits discrimination based on race, skin color, national or ethnic origin, faith, or sexuality. The solution was to make covered women buy regular bus tickets rather than monthly photo passes (*Fyens Stiftstidende* 2009). In May 2013, Dansk Supermarked reversed its previous decision and now permits workers to wear headcoverings.

Surveys about the attitudes of the Danish population towards the prohibition of Muslim veils, scarfs, and burkas show a multifaceted picture of many different opinions. A decision made by the European Court of Justice in March 2017 confirmed that European businesses are allowed to prohibit Muslim women from wearing hijabs and to fire them if they do not follow the rules (Andersen 2017). The debate about a woman's right—or obligation—to wear a hijab, niqab, etc. is ongoing, and it seems impossible to reach a consensus. Is it a sign of female liberation and choice, or a symbol of religious and social oppression, control, abuse of women, sharia law, and segregation of the sexes? For many Danes, the conclusion seems to be that, in the past and today, they will accept immigrants as equals as long as those immigrants do not distinguish themselves culturally from the majority population. Being culturally different means becoming a target, since Danes, sometimes characterized as a tribe, seem to fear the eradication of Danish culture by Islam and view Muslim values as a threat to fundamental Danish values.

This, then, is a brief historical background to the specific situation I will discuss in the rest of this article. The question is, what is it really like to be an immigrant in Denmark—an “other” who may be dark-skinned and dark-haired, surrounded by a sea of pale faces? The theme of the 2017 DAHS Conference was cultural fusion, and in this article I would like to make an attempt at illustrating and discussing the ongoing debate about and process of integrating people with immigrant backgrounds into Danish society. For this purpose, I have chosen to highlight events in the fall of 2016 at Langkær Gymnasium (secondary school). However, I first want to return to my previous discussion of clothing seen as a manifestation of Muslim otherness and discuss other defining elements of the concept of Danish culture.

Defining Danish Culture and Identity

What does it mean to be Danish? What is Danish culture? Surely it is not just the “Danish” clothes that people wear, although they may be quite easy to spot. Food seems to be an intrinsic part of the equation as well. In the summer of 2013, Randers Municipality suddenly made headlines both nationally and internationally. The public institutions—nurseries, pre-schools, and kindergartens—started a

debate about the food being served to the children in their care. The then Danish Prime Minister, Helle Thorning Schmidt, warned about “a slow snatching away of Danish traditions from our public institutions,” prompting employees, parents, board members, and politicians to enter into what came to be dubbed the Meatball War. The “war” was a reaction to a decision in several children’s institutions not to include pork on the menu for children, but to serve only halal-prepared Danish poultry and beef. The debate raged back and forth with arguments about religion, discrimination, prejudice, exaggerated attitudes, the rights and responsibilities of all parents and children, and, of course, Danish-ness. In January of 2016, the city council cast its deciding vote, with the result that all institutions in Randers Municipality were required to serve pork on an equal basis with all other kinds of meat (K. Hansen 2016). So not only does clothing make the blood boil, but food and the way to slaughter and prepare animals have become bones of contention in Denmark today.

Certain values have also been claimed as cultural identifiers. In December 2016, former Secretary of Culture, Bertel Haarder (Venstre [Left, Denmark’s Liberal Party]), announced the new so-called “Denmark Canon.” Earlier that year, he had asked Danes to suggest values that are important for the country and its culture. A total of 2,425 suggestions were made; a committee winnowed them down to twenty, clarifying definitions and deleting overlapping concepts, and in the last round, around three hundred thousand Danes voted for the final ten values, which were then announced as comprising the Denmark Canon (Skov-Jensen 2016). Some argued that it was a redundant exercise in self-righteous complacency, self-glorification, and provincial narrowmindedness. Others found it to be a much needed self-confidence boost and an honest attempt at defining what had placed Danes at the top of the list of the happiest people in the world for three years in a row (in 2017, Denmark fell to number 2, with Norway in the coveted spot as number 1). Furthermore, the Institute for Economics and Peace ranked Denmark second on the Global Peace Index of 2016, after Iceland (Global Peace Index 2016).

One indication that conditions in Denmark may, on the whole, be better than they may appear, in terms of the hybridity that Denmark is slowly embracing, is the ubiquity of *hygge*. *Hygge*, as a concept, has

exploded onto the international scene, accompanied by much-needed pronunciation guides! Danes can be proud when they see that *hygge* is (almost) always correctly labeled a Danish concept. A quick look at Amazon brings nine titles into immediate and tempting view; clearly, *hygge* sells. But it may be a bit misunderstood, as the following blog post attempts to clarify. “On Hygge and What it Really is,” posted on March 17, 2017 by Pernille Ripp, a seventh-grade English teacher of Danish origin in Wisconsin, tries to redefine *hygge*:

I am not wearing wool socks right now. There are no lit candles in my classroom. I am not smothered in blankets, nor playing a board game with a loved one. I am not slowing down, nor contemplating life. I have not cooked an elaborate breakfast before I started my day. And yet, “jeg hygger” right now in my classroom. The morning is quiet and dark, I am content, I have my tea and a new day awaits.

This past year, it has been interesting being a Dane outside of Denmark. It seems as if everywhere I go, my entire culture has been distilled into one word, “hygge” (not pronounced hoo-ga, by the way). Strangers have asked me for tips, my friends have shared their own experiences, and I have smiled, laughed, and tried to explain that *hygge* and being *hyggelig* is not something you create meticulously. Yes, candles may be a part of it and so are warm blankets and fires and laughter and love and books, don’t forget about books. But if you think that that is what *hygge* is, then you are sorely missing the point.

As the elements of *hygge* have been sold to the world, they have become just another form of cultural appropriation. There are, indeed, practical explanations for most of them; we wear warm socks in winter because it is cold, drafty, and sometimes dreary during our dark winters. Candles are for reminding us of the sun which we don’t see for long stretches of time during those same months. Books are important because Denmark believes in an educated populace and so we have amazing libraries all around our country. Growing up we played board games because we didn’t have devices and we had very few channels on TV. Cooking together was much more economical and practical than eating out.

So what is *hygge*, in the eyes of this Dane? It is hard to say, although I have been asked to explain before. *Hygge* just is. But perhaps part of what it is can be said like this: it is a state of contentment. Of being at peace with yourself and others, even if just for small chunks of time. Of being in the now, whatever the now is. Of comfort when the elements seem rough, but also about not taking yourself too seriously. About being gentle when you need to be. About love. About togetherness even if you are alone.

Before you try to create an atmosphere of *hygge*, before you make your life overly complicated searching for an elusive state of something, look around, check yourself; are you content? Are you happy? If yes, then you may already have mastered the art of *hygge* and you didn't even need to wear warm socks.

The question is, how has this *hygge* concept been appropriated, assimilated, absorbed, and completely taken for granted? If we find the answer to those questions, maybe we will have the panacea for spreading, sharing, and enjoying cultural values that are conducive to shaping a peaceful, vibrant, and hybrid community.

Finally, the last framing element I want to discuss before getting to the events at Langkær Gymnasium, is number five on the Denmark Canon, the Danish language. Is it necessary to speak Danish in order to live in Denmark and “be” Danish? This is a huge question facing all immigrants, and the varying governments have had various answers. It would easily fill an entire article if I were to attempt an overview of the language debate, so I am going to give a much-abbreviated version of what has been on and off the table for decades. Initially, there was no requirement for immigrants to learn Danish in order to be eligible for social and financial support from the welfare state. It was assumed that the immigrants would want to assimilate, and in that process, language acquisition was seen as a natural, concomitant result. In 1999, a law was passed requiring that Danish courses become a prerequisite for immigrants to receive financial aid for the first three years of residence (Bondebjerg and Larsen 2009).

Tying language learning to financial support reflected an underlying assumption that immigrants are abusing the social welfare system. In 2013, the government released figures showing that, of the twenty-four thousand people who had received cash benefits for more than

ten out of the preceding fifteen years, six thousand were immigrant women, fully 25 percent of all people receiving cash benefits—even though female immigrants from non-western countries only constitute 3.4 percent of the population between the ages of sixteen and sixty-four. As a result of several years of festering dissatisfaction among politicians and parts of the population with the number of people receiving *Kontanthjælp* (cash benefits), the Minister of Social Affairs and Integration announced that the government wanted to level the playing field for everyone, immigrants and ethnic Danes. People under thirty years old needed to get an education, and those over thirty were expected to get as involved in the labor market as possible. While the Danish language was not perceived as a panacea, it was seen as a requirement leading to a step in the right direction. The then Secretary of Foreigners and Integration (the position has changed its name) stated that she was not impressed with the proposal since immigrants were already required to take Danish lessons and it was already possible to deny them money if they refused to take classes (*Information* 2013). This scenario clearly illustrates the “we say—they say” scenarios that have been rocking Danish politics back and forth and making it very difficult to know when demands would be followed up with (primarily financial) consequences and when politicians would leave matters alone. Another tangent is complaints from “ethnic Danes” who feel that they are being unfairly victimized.

Integration at Langkær Gymnasium

At Langkær, where an abundance of so-called bilingual students are getting an education, cultural diversity is seen as an asset. The school offers three tracks to graduation: gymnasium, HF (*Højere Forberedelseseksamen* = Higher Preparatory Exam), and IB (International Baccalaureat). The school’s advertising brochure explains, “With the international baccalaureate (the IB diploma program), communication at Langkær is characterized by Danish, British, Nigerian, Australian, Arabic, Irish, and American, and with students from more than forty different nationalities, the diversity and cultural differences are quite visible. That is why the meeting of cultures happens daily in the classrooms and all over the school” (Langkær Gymnasium 2017).

Langkær Gymnasium, which opened its doors in 1975, has an average of around nine hundred students aged fifteen to twenty, from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. When fall 2016 semester began, the school welcomed an unprecedented number of second-generation immigrants in the incoming freshman class (known as 1.g). In 2007, 25 percent of the incoming freshmen belonged to ethnic minorities; in 2015 it was 55 percent; and in 2016, students of immigrant background comprised 80 percent of the incoming freshman class. To ensure a productive learning environment for both ethnic Danes and ethnic minorities at the school, the principal decided to follow a new path in creating the classes. The first-year students in the school were organized into seven classes. Three of the classes had special quotas—50 percent of students should be of Danish background, and 50 percent could be ethnic minorities, so-called “other ethnic Danes.” The four other classes consisted solely of students with immigrant backgrounds.

This decision sparked a strong response in the media with a debate that raged for over a month and is still occasionally revisited. The principal’s initiative ignited both positive and negative responses, and the media coverage, as well as reactions from ordinary people and the affected students, illustrate the changing and hybrid nature of the attitudes towards immigrants in contemporary Denmark. With the headline “Segregation or integration? Danish school says ‘ethnic quota’ in classes to help locals stay,” RT news feed introduced the key concepts in the debate. The principal, Yago Bundgaard, defended his decision, saying it had nothing to do with racism but was an attempt to help prevent ethnic Danes from leaving the school. He told the Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR) that, “For real integration to take place in a class there has to be sufficient numbers from both groups for it to happen.” The school placed students into the classes with 50 percent Danish students if they had a “Danish-sounding name.” The argument for the choice was based on culture, as Bundgaard explained: “If there are too few ethnic Danes or bilingual students (*tosprogede*) it becomes difficult for the group to feel at home in the class and impact its culture.” The criteria are not related to language but to whether the students can be categorized as having a “western” cultural background or a “non-western” heritage. If he had chosen to distribute

the ethnic Danes in all seven classes, his experience is that after six months, the Danes would have left and found another school.

When asked if he regretted his decision, given the ensuing media storm, Bundgaard answered no. On the contrary, he found it to be a part of one of the most important discussions about the politics of education he had ever seen because the schools are crucial platforms for integration. He regarded the initiative as an active way to ensure real integration for three freshman classes while still retaining four classes without any ethnic Danes. However, knowing that the ethnic Danes would have left the school if they had been distributed evenly among all seven classes – and, therefore, too thinly – he thinks it was the best decision based on the current reality (R. S. Hansen 2016). The chair of the student organization supported the initiative. He did not like it, but he agreed with the principal's arguments and stated that it was the lesser of two evils, since not meeting people from a different culture means that one never experiences the cultural differences in society. He concluded that prejudices can be found both among ethnic Danes and immigrants (Freije 2016).

Anti-immigration voices claimed that Langkær demonstrated the failure of integration and exposed the danger of an even more highly segregated Denmark. In September 2016, the right-wing blogger Michael Jalving contributed with an interpretation that exemplifies the voices in Denmark warning against Muslim and Arabic immigration. He stated that the consequences of multiculturalism are quite concrete, as illustrated by Bundgaard's actions that have also been used in various other schools where the Danish parents have refused to let their children suffer from failed integration attempts. Furthermore, he claims that although the subject knowledge and proficiency of the students has not been mentioned, the class structure at Langkær reflects the essential fact that the explosive increase in the number of students with a "different ethnic background" undermines and compromises the Danish school system. He concludes that the entire educational system has become a social-ideological experiment in the holy name of immigration. In his view, the consequence of multiculturalism is not integration but segregation (Jalving 2016). A journalist visited the school and talked to some irate students who supposedly used the word "apartheid" about the principal's decision. As it turns out, they

did not know the meaning of the word, but they thought it was “cool” when the journalist asked them to use it (Maikal 2017). The then Secretary of Education recognized the problem with “ghetto-gymnasier” and asked Bundgaard for an explanation of his choices. However, she also emphasized that the principal is the sole person responsible for the distribution of the students in the various classes (*Jyllands Posten* 2016). Many other similar schools in Aarhus have a negligible number of “Danes of other ethnicities,” so while it would clearly be possible to distribute all students evenly throughout all institutions, other area schools have actively opposed this solution (Maikal 2017).

Following up on this situation a year later, in fall 2017, I contacted Kader Maikal, who teaches French and Arabic at Langkær. He is thirty years old, with a mother from Somalia and a father from Djibouti. He lived in France for seven years before arriving in Denmark in 2003. In 2005 he became a student at Langkær, one of four students in the class with a non-Danish ethnic background. After graduation and studies at the university, he was hired as a teacher and had worked at Langkær for four years by then. He is a Muslim and plays an active role in discussions about immigrant students and their integration. Most recently, the debate about the necessity for a prayer room at the college ended with a rejection of the idea. He told the students that while they are students, they can postpone their prayer. He feels confident that his own background gives him a more intimate relationship with the students, who trust him and recognize him as a positive role model. Interestingly, he has also been a target of the growing problem surrounding the ability to freely discuss these issues without being labeled a racist. Upon receiving a low grade, a student accused him of being racist, to which he replied, “Are you color blind?”

Although no one had complained about the class divisions until the media got ahold of the story in fall 2016, Principal Yago Bundgaard was reported to the Human Rights Commission of the UN. He was ordered not to repeat the experiment, and he has not objected to this decision. In fall 2017, only five first-year classes started at Langkær, reflecting a national decline in numbers as students choose other types of education, as well as a decline in the number of students whom Maikal labels “other ethnic Danes” rather than bilingual. This is a clear signal that the “other ethnic Danes” found last year’s prac-

tice discriminating. Instead, the school has been allocated a number of students whose first choice was a different school, which brought the enrollment numbers up. In 2017, all freshman classes consisted of 50 percent “ethnic Danes” and 50 percent “other ethnic Danes.” However, the 2016 experiment was a success insofar as the 20 percent “ethnic Danes” from that year’s freshman class have remained at the school. Maikal suggests a different angle of perception, stating that the word “bilingual” has positive connotations in the US whereas it has negative connotations in Denmark. Similarly, it should be seen as a major success with integration for Langkær that the percentage of “other ethnic Danes” has risen from 20 to 80. Instead of perceiving Langkær as a ghetto college, the schools with a white student majority could now be perceived as such.

An interesting cultural anecdote is the fact that Somali mothers actively request having their children in classes with many “ethnic Danes.” In their eyes, that mix guarantees a higher level of education, which they regard as seminal in their children’s lives. They are positive towards the system to a certain degree, but recent research confirms that “other ethnic Danes” in general have lower grade point averages. The parents may also resort to sending their female children to strict boarding schools in Sudan in order to have them “re-educated” as true Muslims, which endangers their integration. In contrast, Danes tend to perceive the achievement level as being lowered if there are many “other ethnic Danes” in the classes, so the school still seems to face an unbridgeable impasse.

Although some “ethnic Danes” have chosen to bypass Langkær, the fall 2017 classes with their 50-50 mixture seemed to be a better solution. Maikal feels that the school ought to reflect society with a 30-70 percentage as optimal for learning. But he concludes that the cultural mix is excellent for the “ethnic Danes” as well. If they stay the first year, they love the school and recognize how much they gain from the multicultural community. He ended our interview with a strongly optimistic statement: If it can be done at Langkær, it can be done everywhere! I unfortunately do not have any ultimate answers to this multifaceted and persistent issue, but I choose, based on Maikal’s observations, to put my trust in multicultural optimism.

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