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NARRATIVES OF COEXISTENCE

The two nationalistic narratives in Danish compulsory education

Tore Bernt Sørensen

Danmarks Pædagogiske Universitetsskole - Aarhus Universitet of
Copenhagen

Danish School of Education - Aarhus University of Copenhagen

Abstract

As in many other European countries one of the most prominent challenges to the Danish education system in the last twenty years has concerned how to cope with ethnic and cultural diversity. On the basis of existing research findings, this study discusses factors which sustain the educational inequalities facing ethnic minority pupils in the Danish context. The main argument is that two nationalistic narratives, adopted by policy-makers and education professionals respectively, continuously has impeded the development of intercultural education. The paper maintains that both narratives have drawn on national-liberal ideas popularly ascribed to Danish priest and scholar N.F.S. Grundtvig. Against this background, the paper points out two distinctive sets of effects. First, the nationalistic narrative adopted by policy-makers serves to legitimate neo-conservative education policies. Second, teachers and teacher trainers have for decades endorsed a 'pedagogical nationalism' which relies on implicit double standards. Vague ideas in the disguise of child-centred education have thus allowed a nationalistic framework to be taken more or less for granted while the backgrounds, resources and needs of ethnic minority pupils have generally been ignored. The paper concludes by discussing the prospects for intercultural education in Denmark in the light of the two nationalistic narratives and the impact of transnational policy trends related to market ideas and performativity. In that respect, it is argued that while certain initiatives and policies might improve educational equality for ethnic minority pupils in the longer term, the opportunities for substantial progress in the short term appear rather bleak.

Like in most other countries, policy-makers in Denmark have a major responsibility for the educational inequalities facing ethnic minority pupils due to neo-conservative education policies. In that respect, teachers and teacher trainers may be seen as key actors in confronting and opposing such policies which undermine the peaceful co-existence in the Danish multicultural society. However, on the basis of existing research

findings this paper argues that there are actually two nationalistic narratives at work in Danish education since long established ideas and practices of education among teachers and teacher trainers also impede the development of intercultural education in Denmark. The notion of 'pedagogical nationalism' will be used to conceptualize this particular narrative. This argument adds new perspectives on the barriers for developing intercultural education in the Danish context.

The Danish context

Public sector education has been strongly supported in Denmark since the beginning of the 20th century. Thus, currently 84 per cent of children attend the public sector comprehensive school, called the *folkeskole* (literally meaning "the people's school") (Hornbek 2009). Due to labour immigration, family reunifications and refugees the number of ethnic minority pupils in Danish compulsory education increased steadily from the 1960s to the mid-2000s. Today, the share of ethnic minority pupils is currently around ten percent, with the largest shares living in the major urban areas.

In official terminology, 'bilingual pupils' has since the mid-1990s been the main term to denote the group of ethnic minority pupils in Denmark. Between 1996 and 2010, the Danish School Act defined the group as follows:

Bilingual children are children who speak another mother tongue than Danish, and who do not learn Danish until they come into contact with the surrounding society, e.g. through the school's teaching.¹

However, in the name of 'deregulation' the School Act was universalised in terms of language norms in 2010 when the section containing the group definition was repealed with uniform parliamentary support and instead integrated within pre-school legislation (Act 360, 2010). At first glance, the repeal may appear peculiar since one of the most prominent challenges to Danish education concerns how to cope with ethnic and cultural diversity (Winther-Jensen 2004). Research evidence has since the mid-1990s spelled out the educational inequalities facing ethnic minority pupils in Denmark. The issues often mentioned include national and local policy-makers' lack of commitment, the repeal in 2002 of the municipal obligation to provide mother tongue tuition for pupils with origins outside the European Economic Area, lack of transparency concerning resource allocation, low levels of formal competences among teachers, and the absence of a 'culture of evaluation'. The expansive Danish research evidence includes e.g. Kristjánsdóttir (2006), Kristjánsdóttir & Timm (2007), Gitz-Johansen (2006), Karrebæk (2006), Sørensen (2011), Saarpur et al. (2004) and Danmarks Evalueringsinstitut (2007). Their findings are supported by the otherwise enormously influential PISA and TIMSS studies and the OECD peer review of Danish schooling (OECD, 2004). However, seen in

the context of Danish education policy since the 1970s the recent step towards 'language-blindness' in the School Act is not particularly surprising. Rather, the repeal constitutes yet another manifestation of the profound lack of political will to recognize the cultural diversity in Danish society as a permanent condition.

Two nationalistic narratives

Nationalism and globalizing processes often co-exist as phenomena shaping educational policy-making and practices (Rhea & Seddon 2005). This is also the case in the Danish education policy where the global generic policy ensemble of market, management and performativity (Ball 2008) has become increasingly evident during the 2000s. These trends have put the traditional sector-specific mindsets and practices of teachers and teacher trainers under pressure. On the other hand, educational policy-making as well as teacher professionalism in Danish education remain profoundly shaped by two distinctive yet related nationalistic narratives. According to Zambeta (2005), nationalistic narratives rely on claims concerning the distinctiveness, originality, nobility and supremacy of a national culture. This paper discusses the particular expressions and effects of the two nationalistic narratives at work in Danish education.

Both nationalistic narratives legitimate themselves by referring to the heritage of the national icon, priest and universal-historian N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783 – 1872). Even though Korsgaard & Wiborg (2006) dispute the ubiquitous claims for Grundtvig's profound influence on Danish education in the 19th and early 20th century, the legacy of Grundtvig is very often invoked by policy-makers and education professionals. Against this background, Grundtvig's educational ideas, and not least how they have been kneaded for various purposes, provide a key to understand the educational inequalities facing ethnic minority pupils in Denmark.

Winther-Jensen (2004) thus associates Grundtvig's communitarian ideas of a 'school for life' with a distinctive Danish educational tradition since they remain highly evident in governance, curriculum and teaching methods (Winther-Jensen 2004). The ideas have for example contributed to the relatively low levels of tracking and assessment in the *folkeskole*, the relatively decentralized character of Danish compulsory education, and the freedom of method granted to teachers (Winther-Jensen 2007). At the same time, these apparently anti-elitist and liberal educational ideas have remained firmly embedded in essentialist conceptions of Danish national culture. According to Grundtvig's spiritual ideal of 'vertical enlightenment' the Danes must thus share a common language, history, religion and tradition which he associated closely with the mythic roots of the Danish nation and the soil of its territory (Korsgaard 1997).

Both nationalistic narratives have drawn on these national-liberal ideas and promoted lingual and cultural homogeneity as educational objectives. However, they also differ in some ways. First, the nationalistic narrative inherent to the neo-conservative policy discourses has especially during the 2000s invoked Grundtvig's ideas to legitimate a more centrally defined school curriculum which puts emphasis on the reproduction of 'Danish values' through education in order to reinforce social cohesion. A crucial element in the restoration of an explicitly national curriculum has been the project of the 'Danish Cultural Canon' which was initiated by the Liberal-Conservative government in 2005 and one year later resulted in canons covering for example literature, history, film, music, architecture, design and, notably, children's culture. The particular Canons of Literature and History have thus since the mid-2000s been increasingly integrated as prescribed knowledge areas in the national curriculum. In addition, a Canon of Democracy meant to serve as educational guidance in schools was published in 2008. This canon claims that the development of the liberal Danish democratic system has been profoundly shaped by Christian values (Sørensen 2011).

The nationalistic narrative guiding policy-making is supplemented by the 'pedagogical nationalism' among teachers and teacher trainers. This second nationalistic narrative puts emphasis on other aspects of Grundtvig's ideas, in particular the socialization of pupils into learning communities defined by consensus, solidarity and equality. In practice, these apparently good-natured principles have caused inertia in the educational system in terms of confronting the inequalities facing ethnic minority pupils. Dahler-Larsen (2006) thus points out that teachers and teacher educators in Denmark idealize learning practices which consider life-long and life-wide development. The ambiguity and difficulties associated with evaluating such learning processes mean that the notion of 'soft competences' has been widely applied to epitomize the incomprehensible and to articulate a disdain for assessment in general. Against this background, Dahler-Larsen argues that Danish teacher professionalism for decades has sustained inertia in educational development due to the fundamental claim that the most important outcomes of education are not measurable and should indeed never be measured because if outcomes were to be measured, the individual pupil would become subject to instrumental views of learning which might fail to appreciate their personal development. In other words, the assumptions underlying Danish teacher professionalism have resulted in an opaque mysticism in the disguise of child-centred learning.

In the light of the well-documented inertia among teachers and teacher educators in responding to the increasing cultural diversity in Danish society on any substantial level, this mysticism is also the key to understand the character and workings of pedagogic nationalism in Denmark. Pedagogic nationalism may be understood as being based on double standards, that is, hypocrisy, which in practice makes it remarkably compatible

with the neo-conservative rationale of 'vertical enlightenment' promoted by policy-makers. On the one hand, pedagogic nationalism thus acclaims the inviolability of the individual pupil, while it on the other hand entails the general neglect of the particular backgrounds, resources and needs of ethnic minority pupils. Pedagogic nationalism has therefore in a more or less implicit manner sustained the essentialist paradigm of one language/one religion/one people/one nation. Accordingly, deeper reflections on intercultural education and short-lived experiments have been sidelined by the usual educational practices, supplemented with the occasional celebration of cultural diversity (Kristjánsdóttir 2006). Furthermore, it should be mentioned that pedagogic nationalism is manifesting itself well beyond classroom activities, for example when teachers focus on the dichotomy of Danish versus non-Danish in their conversations with ethnic minority parents as well as indigenous parents (Lehmkuhl 2004), or in the case of 'cultural evenings' in schools where artifacts and practices of ethnic minority groups are celebrated. Altogether, these undoubtedly well-intentioned yet ignorant efforts serve to entrench the 'othering' of ethnic minority pupils and parents in educational practices and wider society (Gitz-Johansen 2006).

The prospects for intercultural education

In Danish compulsory education, moving beyond the current precarious situation must involve reflections about how intercultural education can be developed in a context where policy-making as well as teacher professionalism are profoundly influenced by nationalistic narratives. As those most acutely aware of the fundamentally social character of education, teachers and teacher trainers remain key actors in the development of intercultural education. However, substantial development hinges on the explicit confrontation with both national narratives, that is, the pedagogical nationalism existing among colleagues and the general field of education as well as the neo-conservative policies imposed top-down.

However, the fundamental impact of economic globalization and transnational policy-making on national and local education policy should be considered in that respect (Moutsios 2010). Since the 1990s the OECD and the European Union have successfully promoted a generic policy ensemble of market, management and performativity (Ball 2008). As a result, educational policy-making has in many countries been influenced by a particular form of neo-liberal economic determinism. Ball (2008) argues that the overall emergence of performativity signals the cultural refocusing of education as a regime of accountability which employs (often opaque) judgments, comparisons and displays as means of control and change. In the general discussion of the implications of such cultural refocusing and the prospects for intercultural education in that respect,

it is useful to return to the crystalline work of Lyotard. Lyotard (1986) used the concept of performativity to address fundamental changes in the conception of knowledge in contemporary higher education. In particular, Lyotard anticipated that the emerging commodification of knowledge would lead to the reversal of the relationship between science and technology, that is, an subordination of the 'truth criterion' (Is it true?) by the 'technical criterion' (Is it efficient and salable?). In this way Lyotard pointed out that meticulous research based in robust ontological and epistemological arguments was likely to become replaced by 'what works' research aimed at fixing 'system errors' without questioning the fundamental 'truth' assumptions underlying the system in general as long as the system appears efficient and responsive to consumer demands. In other words, the shift towards performativity may entail that controversial and 'inconvenient' truths are silenced or ridiculed as being irresponsible according to the majority's common sense assumptions about social reality. So, where does this leave intercultural education and the prospects for improving educational inequalities?

Especially during the 2000s, Danish education has been clearly affected by transnational policy-making. Like elsewhere, this entails challenging the established ideas of teacher professionalism. Dahler-Larsen (2006) points out that the continuing invocation of Grundtvig by teaching professionals and the associated dismissal of systematic evaluation procedures have rendered the Danish *folkeskole* extremely vulnerable to such external pressures. Provided that a 'culture of evaluation' based on professional and pedagogical criteria had been developed it could have served to argue against the reductionist 'one-size-fits-all' policies now so eagerly adopted by Danish policy-makers (Dahler-Larsen 2006). Accordingly, Danish compulsory education have during the last decade been subject to the transnational rhetorics of 'the knowledge economy' and the associated pressures of performativity, with statutory 'National Tests', publication of school performances and freer school choice as some of the clearest manifestations of the efforts to introduce market ideas in the school system (Sørensen 2011).

Against this background, the prospects of intercultural education in the Danish context may be understood as depending on the outcomes related to the tensions between global policy trends and the two nationalistic narratives of neo-conservative policy discourses and pedagogic nationalism. In that respect, it could be argued that scientific progress in educational sciences combined with the subordination of education to economic imperatives may indeed help to raise awareness of the obvious rationales for intercultural education in a long-term socio-economic perspective. However, Lyotard (1986) and Ball (2008) remind us that within the paradigm of performativity educational systems the consideration of 'truth criteria' are subordinated the endorsement of 'technical criteria'. In other words, despite the pedagogical truth criteria which unambiguously tell us that

the systematic recognition of ethnic minority pupils' backgrounds, resources and needs would benefit their learning as well as widen the horizons of their classmates, the case for intercultural education may continue to be considered irrelevant in an anxious market place profoundly biased towards the consumer demands of the indigenous majority. In this perspective, the very term 'National Tests' perfectly epitomizes the ways 'technical criteria' at once may serve the 'efficient' accumulation of market information and the measurement-driven reinforcement of the conventional truth concerning power relations between ethnic majority and minority.

Furthermore, performativity and the associated cultural refocusing of education result in stressful school environments. Dahler-Larsen (2006) argues that the 'culture of evaluation' promoted in Danish education is actually likely to lead to a 'performance paradox' where the adopted policy tools may prove to have damaging effects on school performance. In this process of adaptation to an educational market place, the prospects for intercultural education in Denmark appear rather bleak since the basic conditions for reflection and substantial critique are eroded by the new demands of performativity. An extremely dedicated math teacher epitomized the implications elegantly when he during an action learning project, in which the author was involved, stated '*When I am stressed, I start thinking conservatively*'. Another expression of the current lack of energy is the finding that in Danish schools with large shares of ethnic minority pupils the school heads assess resistance among staff to be the most prominent barrier for pedagogic development (Undervisningsministeriet 2007). Thus, while there also in Denmark may be a lot of action involved in the creation of the emerging educational market place, nothing really happens in terms of confronting the educational inequalities facing ethnic minority pupils. If anything, the bias of the market place is likely to deepen them in the years to come.

Striking a note of optimism in the end, the strong political commitment to assimilation has on national and local level led to the funding of several R&D projects in which aspects of intercultural education are discernible. Thus, while Danish state authorities, in particular the three ministries of Education, Culture and Refugees, Immigrants and Integration, during the 2000s have put themselves firmly in the driving seat in the pursuit of swift assimilation (Kristjánsdóttir 2006, Sørensen 2011), especially R&D projects in relation to 'language-across-the-curriculum' have reflected more inclusive approaches to lingual and cultural diversity (such as Laursen et al. 2008 and Laursen 2010). The findings from these projects have been presented and discussed on numerous conferences and in-service teacher training courses (Sorensen 2008). Moreover, the Danish Ministry of Education in 2009 established a 'task force' to disseminate R&D findings and support local school development. Finally, the 2006 reform of teacher education may over the next decades nourish the development of

intercultural education since it established 'Danish as a second language' as a permanent subject in teacher education. In addition, teacher students must now learn about the challenges bilingual pupils face in each subject (Act 579, 2006). While such projects and initiatives are not likely to lead to substantial changes in the short term they may in the longer term contribute to intercultural education being taken seriously among policy-makers as well as teaching professionals and thereby influence the 'truth' and 'technical criteria' underpinning Danish education.

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Notes

- 1 In Danish: 'Ved tosprogede børn forstås børn, der har et andet modersmål end dansk, og som først ved kontakt med det omgivende samfund, eventuelt gennem skolens undervisning, lærer dansk.'