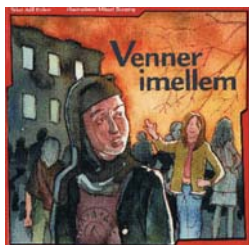


The Importance of Being Danish

Anita Flemington draws parallels between attitudes toward bilingual and multicultural education in Denmark and the U.S.



Two years have passed since I wrote about bilingual and multicultural education in Denmark (*Language Magazine*, XX), and some of the issues

surrounding them. Since that time, Denmark, usually a small, quiet country has been in the world spotlight. In September of 2005, the Danish daily newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten* published a cartoon depiction of the prophet Mohammad. This caused international reaction on both sides - in favor of freedom of press and outrage at the disrespect for a religion and its followers.

The pros and cons of the cartoon will not be discussed in this article. What will be explored are any reactions, changes and opinions that have emerged in Denmark over the past two years, and how they relate to education.

According to Anne Holmen, Professor in the Department of Educational Anthropology at the Danish University of Education, there has been a growing conservative movement in Denmark. This can be seen by two apparent

changes in curriculum and policy. The first is the growing sense of a need for ethnic-Danish identity and cultural literacy, or *Kultur Kanon*. The second change is the reactionary solutions to an increased awareness of diversity issues. Many of the solutions are based on anecdotal evidence rather than empirical data.

Trend # 1 — Danish Kultur Kanon

During the past year, the Kultur Kanon was published which profiled the critical concepts thought necessary to be a “good Dane”. The idea is very much like the American author E.D Hirsch’s concept of “cultural literacy” and “What every 4th grader should know” series. The *Kultur Kanon* book consists of concepts in Danish literature, history, visual and performing arts, architecture and language. According to the authors and many policy makers in Denmark, the knowledge of these concepts is essential to being a “good Dane” at a time when the Danish society is becoming less homogeneous. All of the educators interviewed expressed concerns over policy makers’ reactions to demographic changes.

Signe Roerdam Thomsen, a fifth grade teacher of immigrants at *Lindevejskole* stated

that the *Kultur Kanon* is unrealistic as most ethnic Danes do not know all of the content that is contained in the *Kultur Kanon* book. In addition, she was concerned about the fact that the *Kultur Kanon* book does not include any information about the non-ethnic Danish nationals who have had an influence on Danish culture.

Another concern that Signe expressed is the growing limited access to motivating, culture-based literature such as *Venner imellem* which deals with the issues of a young Islamic girl in a Danish school. The Danish company that published texts in Danish such as *Venner imellem* is no longer in business. The Danish education ministry has stated that schools are no longer allowed to use texts dealing with multicultural issues. It is obvious to see the influence that the *Kultur Kanon* concept has had on the selection of reading materials. Signe is still using the old texts, but when these are gone, there will be no new ones to replace them.

According to Signe Roerdam Thomsen who also teaches fifth grade history of religion, teachers have been instructed to focus primarily the Lutheran religion which is the Danish national religion. Previously she taught



information about all of the major religions of the world. The new fifth grade religious history text published last year states, "Alle terrorister er muslimer" (All terrorists are Muslim). It presents a very narrow view of Islam. Again, there is a growing concern among Danish educators about the focus on ethnic-Danish culture at the expense of any positive mention of diversity.

Trend # 2 — Reactionary solutions to an increased awareness of diversity issues

In addition to Signe's classes, there is also a schoolwide trend toward a more conservative agenda. Last year, her program which included innovative curriculum that used content to teach Danish as a second language, was profiled in my article about education in Denmark. Signe was on maternity leave for the 2005-2006 school year. So I was anxious to visit her classes and observe the progress of the program. According to Signe, there has been no progress at Lindevejskole in her year of absence. As a matter of fact, she stated that the program she and several colleagues had so successfully implemented has

been all but abandoned.

I also visited Fredricksundsvejskole, another school that I had profiled in my previous article. This is a school where the majority of the population is comprised of immigrants. The results of the school had been very successful and it had been touted as one of the exemplary schools in the Copenhagen school system. But as is the case in this country, the very successful principal was promoted to the district office and the fate of a very exemplary bilingual program is in question under the new administration.

Over the past few years while visiting Fredricksundsvejskole, I had also built a rapport with the assistant principal Karen Hansen. So when I visited Fredricksundsvejskole, Kirsten enlightened me as to the status of the school program. Again, there is a trend toward more homogeneity and accountability.

The heightened sense of stress among the teachers was very obvious. In speaking with university faculty, teachers and administrators, there is a definite sense of stress. They also expressed a concern for the fact that up until recently, Danish children and young people have always loved school.

This is changing due to the increased pressure on both the students and teachers to perform. They ask the question, "Is this part of the Kultur Kanon?"

In August at the start of the school year, Lise Egholm, a principal at the Radmangsgadeskole, reconfigured the kindergarten classes. Alarmed by the decrease in the ethnic Danish student population, she decided to make a drastic move. Immigrant students were separated from fluent Danish students into different tracks. This was done in an effort to stem the "white flight" from the school.

In an effort to deal with the linguistic and cultural difference in Danish society, what became apparent in speaking with educators both at the school sites and at the university is that Denmark's solution to the education of their immigrant population is to turn toward the more conservative or U.S. model.

At Lindevejskole, Signe Roerdam Thomsen no longer teaches the innovative content-based language development classes. She now teaches several periods of intensive language development. There is a mixture of immigrants and students who were born in Denmark but are not proficient in Danish. The group consisted of students from Turkey,