

Professional Inclusion of a Native Foreigner: a quasi-personal uphill journey

Do you speak Danish?

The question was asked curtly and patronisingly when I approached a leading school in the early 1990s. My response, as I had only arrived in The Faroe Islands a year prior to my visit to those hallowed portals, was obviously ‘no’.

“Then you cannot teach here.”

One short, sharp, swift response that reduced my qualifications and my three-year work experience at the university in India to nothing was not particularly pleasant and left me feeling stranded. As it was, I felt I had already stooped to conquer as there was no chance of teaching English literature or language at The University of The Faroe Islands in the 90ies. Given no other options, I had decided to settle for a career well below my professional level by teaching at a higher secondary school. So, this negative brevity of a response was most unwelcome!

Subsequently, I did get to teach English at the Torshavn evening school and the Cambridge English courses at Fróðskaparsetur Føroya. I got a permanent job in a school, which was more progressive than the previous one, where I worked for 21 years. I took an M.SC in Business Studies to ensure that I updated my competencies for the ethos of this school. Finally, I joined Fróðskaparsetur Føroya and got my PhD in Educational Sciences to ensure that my qualifications could not be questioned. I do finally feel at home - academically. Professionally, the sense of alienation that comes from being an immigrant can be exacerbated by local conditions. It is a constant battle to maintain a positive perspective in the face of invisible barriers that alienate one unintentionally or otherwise.

Immigrants or ‘new arrivals’ face many complex challenges in The Faroe Islands. The language factor and the inflexible attitude of the host country towards qualifications, which do not carry the stamp of a Danish or Faroese educational institution, negate the valuable contribution that immigrants can make to a society, thereby leaving immigrants and the Faroese society poorer. It is crucial to have a system of accreditation, which deals fairly and respectfully of qualifications acquired outside Denmark and The Faroe Islands to level the playing field for immigrants. One cannot demand that immigrants participate in society, and at the same time meet immigrants with blanket scepticism. Procedures must be in place for professional accreditation as these are fundamental for access to the job market and inclusion.

The teaching of Faroese for foreigners is only now falling into a planned structure styled on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. This will presumably be an improvement on the paltry 30 hours of Faroese teaching that were available. Investment in teaching adult immigrants Faroese is very different from teaching children and teaching Faroese as a mother tongue. Given the fact that it takes 6 to 7 years to use a foreign language comfortably is something the government will have to incorporate into its strategy for integration.

I will look at the policy level to explore the stance on immigration that the islands have as a starting point, taking into consideration the socio-political perspective of the Faroese-Danish

ties. Volckmar (2019) states, “Policy diffusion is defined as one government’s policy choices being influenced by the choices made by other governments” (p. 124).¹ The overwhelming influence of the Danish policy on the Faroese one is no secret. Denmark has a stringent immigration policy, and the Takeover Act of The Faroe Islands (2005) has not seen the immigration and integration portfolio as yet in Faroese hands. The assumption must be that any stance Faroese policy makers decide on cannot be very far from the parent policy on immigration.

The Danish policy introduced the ‘Integration Contract’ in 2006 and passing the ‘Integration Exam’ in 2007 as the benchmark for retaining the immigrants or refusing them residence in the country. This stance has been described as punitive because social benefits, permanent residence and citizenship are subject to mastery of language and cultural issues. Jensen, Schmidt, Tørslev, Weibel, and Vitus (2009) evaluate the attitudinal stance and highlight that the Danish immigration policies are contradictory.² They claim to want to afford equal rights, equal opportunities and self-reliance for all peoples, but define the goal of integration as cultural oneness. The assumption is “...that equality requires a certain degree of sameness... To be equal in Danish society, thus tends to imply to be similar” (Jöhncke 2007, Hervik 1999 in Jensen et al., 2009, p. 5). Individuals are responsible for their own inclusion through cultural transformation, where adopting Danish values is seen as integration. The writers describe the stance as one of assimilation, i.e., the immigrant does not retain his/her cultural identity and loses it by fully adapting to the host culture (Berry, 1980 in Ojeda et al, 2012).³ There is no discussion of the fact that integration is not guaranteed despite one learning the language and acquiring a sound knowledge of host country culture.

A similar stance can be identified in the Faroese context with emphasis on immigrants being taught Faroese language and culture. The importance of the immigrants’ cultures and languages are not acknowledged. It is as if when one is an immigrant, one is not entitled to the inextricable and fundamental link between mother tongue and identity as a right, which is taken for granted in the identities of the people of the host nation. The latest directive for teaching of Faroese as a second language (I would have preferred Faroese as an additional language) adopted in Oct 2020 states the right of immigrant children to have mother tongue or L1 teaching and teaching about their cultures of origin. However, it lacks strategic detail and operational clarity on how this would be achieved.

The awareness of multiculturalism, multilingualism, culturally responsive teaching and understanding of inclusive education as also including immigrants are not found in societal discourse in our country - we are going snail-paced in our efforts towards integration. The lack of maturity in public discourse acknowledging that the host nation and the immigrants have mutual rights and obligations is deafening in its silence. The discourse is still ‘othering’,

¹ Volckmar, Nina. (2019). The Faroese Path to a Comprehensive Education System. *Nordic Journal of Educational History* v. 6, (2), pp. 121–141.

² Jensen, T.G., Schmidt, G., T, Tørslev, M.T, Weibel, K. & Vitus, K. (2009). Analysis of integration Policies and public State-endorsed institutions at national and regional levels in Denmark. The Danish National Centre for Social Research.

³ Ojeda, L., Pina-Watson, B., Castillo, L., Castillo, R., Khan, N & Leigh, J. (2012). Acculturation, Enculturation, Ethnic Identity, and Conscientiousness as Predictors of Latino Boys’ and Girls’ Career Decision Self-Efficacy. *Journal of Career Development*. 39. pp. 208-228. 10.1177/0894845311405321.

which is defined “as a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities” (Powell and Menendean, 2016).⁴

‘Othering’ and marginality can be experienced at both group and individual levels. I choose not to delve into the group ones, where there are undesirable generalisations and stereotypes about immigrants that are not worth my time, energy or attention. I intend to focus on my individual, professional experiences, which may already afford readers a basis for saying that my experience is not representative. Unfortunately, I can categorically assure them it is!

So, do I experience ‘othering’ in my professional journey? Absolutely! I have been working in this country since 1993, so I have many and specific instances. I share the gist of a few of the instances. I would divide these experiences into overt and covert ‘othering’ experiences. If I were to begin with the overt ones, it would be where authorities have shown unjustified scepticism over qualifications that I have come with to the Faroes to my face. They placed conditions in my job appointment, which they did not demand of other colleagues. They expressed concerns about how advisable it was to have a ‘foreigner’ involved at certain levels, when discussing my role in professional activity, but simultaneously, exploited my ‘otherness’ to include me in activities, so they could claim that they had been inclusive! The most unpleasant one was that a job appointment created some issues, as the fact I was better qualified than other applicants was not properly established. These ‘othering’ experiences drain one of motivation and energy, even though I am strong enough to believe that I have contributed to Faroese society and not been leeching off it in any form or manner.

Though I’ve many experiences of covert ‘othering’, I share just one example. It is not seeking my formal inclusion in forums when it comes to teaching pre- and in-service compulsory school teachers how to teach Faroese to speakers of other languages. My competencies in second language acquisition and foreign language pedagogy are relevant for preparing compulsory school teachers to teach immigrants. I cannot teach Faroese, but these teachers need more than just Faroese. Teaching a second or foreign language is complex requiring social, psychological and linguistic perspectives and is very different from mother tongue or first language pedagogy. I hope that ethnic Faroese teaching professionals adopt principles of foreign language acquisition to give the school teachers important skills, and by extension, positively influence the learning experience of immigrant children. The pedagogical focus must be on using culturally responsive and inclusive pedagogy to meet the needs of immigrant learners.

I have had Danish/Faroese citizenship for years, but that is no protection against overt or covert ‘othering’ in Faroese society. The tendency to designate being ‘Faroese’ – whatever that means – as a competence in itself is tiresome. On a bad day, I find this tedious and annoying. On a good day, I just work harder.

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⁴ Powell, J., & Menendean, S. (2016). The Problem of Othering: Towards Inclusiveness and Belonging. *Othering and Belonging: Expanding the Circle of Human Concern*, 2, 14-39.