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How a school setting can generate social capital for young refugees: Qualitative insights from a folk high school in Denmark

Anne Sofie Børsch[1*], Morten Skovdal[1], Signe Smith Jervelund[1]

[1]Department of Public Health, University of Copenhagen
*abo@sund.ku.dk

Abstract

Many of the refugees who have recently arrived to Denmark and other European countries are young people. In order to support refugee youth, it is important to understand how institutions and initiatives in the receiving countries may best facilitate their social inclusion. Drawing on the concept of social capital, this paper explores school practices supporting refugees through a qualitative case study of a Danish folk high school – an informal residential college for young people. At the school, participant observation, 10 interviews (with school management, four refugee students and four majority ethnic Danish students) as well as two focus groups (with majority ethnic and refugee students, respectively) were carried out. We discuss the school resources that help create a setting in which students and teachers may work collaboratively to support the integration of young refugees, highlighting four key dimensions: i) intensive instruction in the local language, ii) a commitment to nurturing positive interethnic relationships, iii) a sense of collective responsibility, and iv) an inclusive school ethos. We conclude with a discussion on how lessons from our case study can inform a wider conceptualisation of a 'refugee-competent school' setting.

Key words: Young; Refugees; Social Capital; Integration; Schools; Denmark

Introduction

Young adults between the ages of 18 and 34 make up slightly more than half of the people seeking refuge in Europe during recent years (Eurostat 2018). Though young people with a refugee background may possess many strengths (Eide et al. 2018), their life situations are often characterized by ruptures, social exclusion and a weakened sense of belonging (Correa-Velez, Gifford and Barnett 2010). Going through early adulthood as a refugee can be a particularly challenging situation since the resettlement process happens alongside the establishment of a foundation for adult life. Thus, being a newly arrived young refugee entails a number of transitions. These include socialisation through the acquisition of knowledge, skills and norms associated with being an adult member of the receiving society; the sociocultural adaptation to life in the receiving society; and the process of mental recovery and regaining of meaning and hope under circumstances of trauma or exile-related stressors (Pastoor 2015).

According to existing studies, the transitions that refugees undergo upon resettlement are manifold and demanding. Separation from family, friends and established networks may cause feelings of social isolation and can be detrimental to refugees' mental health (Montgomery 2008; Vervliet et al. 2014; Pastoor 2015). Lacking proficiency in the language spoken in the receiving country has been found to be associated with social isolation and poorer wellbeing (Kosonen 2008; Montgomery 2008; Valenta 2008; Hebbani, Colic-Peisker and Mackinnon 2018). Unfamiliarity with everyday practices and unspoken expectations in the new environment can lead to social exclusion, self-doubt and feelings of inferiority (Valenta 2008; Larsen 2011a, 2011b; Oppedal and Idsøe 2012). Furthermore, a damaged sense of trust in others may lead to social isolation, interpersonal difficulties and loneliness (Ni Raghallaigh 2014).

To support young refugees in their integration into the receiving society, there is a need to understand and facilitate processes that overcome the challenges they face as newcomers. Educational institutions are increasingly viewed as playing an integral role in supporting the integration of young refugees (Taylor and Sidhu 2012; Block et al. 2014). In Denmark, one initiative is to offer young refugees a stay at a folk high school – an informal residential college for young adults – as a part of their mandatory integration programme upon resettlement. This particular form of education has been found to support the wellbeing, personal and social development of majority ethnic students (Wistoft and Stovgaard 2012). However, to our knowledge, no studies have been carried out examining the

potential of folk high schools in supporting recently arrived refugees. Against this background, we explore the role of a Danish folk high school in the integration of recently arrived young refugees. We focus our analysis around the concept of social capital, as it is useful for highlighting the particular school practices that facilitate young refugees' access to valuable social relationships and resources. Thus, this paper seeks to answer the following research question: How do folk high schools generate social capital serving to promote the social inclusion and psychosocial wellbeing of young refugees? While we acknowledge the specific and local character of the study setting, we argue that our findings delineate connections, practices and processes that can inform other initiatives promoting 'refugee-competent school' settings (Pastoor 2015) conducive of social inclusion.

The Context of the Study: The Danish Folk High School as an Actor in National Refugee Integration Programmes

Folk high schools were founded in the mid-19th century and were initially aimed at providing civic education for young people of peasantry to engage in societal matters (Laursen 2010). Over time, however, folk high schools became popular with Danish youth in general. Today, there are 70 folk high schools in Denmark with different teaching profiles covering a range of subjects such as sports, politics and arts,. They attract people in their late teens to mid-twenties, including many international students, attending the schools for typically four to six months. Attendance does not give any formal qualifications but is aimed at personal and social development, clarification of educational and employment goals and increased civic participation. Students usually choose one main subject as well as a number of smaller electives, and classes run from Monday to Friday. Since the folk high schools are boarding schools, students also share their leisure time and weekends, just like they are expected to take part in daily chores around the school. As such, folk high schools constitute small communities based on norms of reciprocity and mutual obligations.

In 2002, the first initiative for including the folk high schools in Denmark's national integration policy was taken (Folketinget 2002). According to the Danish Integration Act, refugees who have been granted asylum as well as family reunified to refugees are offered a free mandatory integration programme by the municipalities (Danish Ministry of Immigration and Integration 2017). In line with a general 'work first discourse' (Andersen, Larsen and Møller 2009 p. 274), which has been at the heart of Danish integration policy since the 1990s, the aim of the integration programme is for refugees to become self-supporting through employment. The integration programme addresses this

goal through its two main elements: training of Danish language skills and labour market oriented activities. Labour market oriented activities under the integration programme include un-paid internships and employment supported by wage subsidies as well as labour market counselling and activities to upgrade the refugees' skills for future employment. Folk high school courses are one example of an activity for upgrading skills and increasing employability (Danish Ministry of Immigration and Integration 2017). Following a revision of the Danish Integration Act in 2016, the duration of the programme was shortened from three years to one year with the intention of making refugees self-supporting within their first year of resettlement. It is however possible to extend the programme (Danish Ministry of Immigration and Integration 2016).

As a part of the integration programme, the municipality can offer refugees between 18 and 29 years of age a course at a folk high school lasting no more than 26 weeks. Before the integration policy change in 2016, there were no particular requirements that young refugees should meet to qualify for a stay at a folk high school. However, under the current legislation, refugees who have been deemed eligible for regular employment by their caseworker should only be offered a folk high school course if this is assumed to significantly improve their employability or chances of progressing in the educational system (Højskolerne 2017).

As of April 2016, about 50 per cent of Danish folk high schools had refugees among their students (Mikkelsen 2016). To our knowledge, no records exist on the demographics of folk high school students with a refugee background. However, of all 18-to-29-year-old refugees who obtained a residence permit in Denmark in 2015, about 80 % were male (Statistics Denmark 2016).

At the schools, refugees are enrolled in a course on Danish language and culture as their main subject and participate in labour market oriented activities, such as instruction in the structure of the Danish labour market and internships with local workplaces. Other than this, they follow the same physical, practical or artistic electives as the other students. According to the national integration policy, instruction in Danish language and culture has to make up at least a third of the refugees' scheduled school hours (Danish Ministry of Immigration and Integration 2016). From a policy perspective, the folk high school courses are framed as a means for recently arrived refugees to acquire linguistic and cultural skills needed for entry into the labour market. In this paper, we demonstrate and argue that the folk high schools do much more than that.

Theoretical Framework

In analysing how the folk high school under study supports young refugees, we draw on the concept of social capital as outlined in the work of Bourdieu (1977, 1986, 1989) and Putnam (2000) as well as Field's (2003) review of social capital. Social capital is a contested concept, which has been criticised for being too focused on individual and local levels of analysis at the expense of wider socio-economic macro perspectives (Fine 1999; Blaxter and Hughes 2000; Molyneux 2002) and for promoting particular political agendas (Cheong et al. 2007). However, as Morrice (2007) has previously argued, the concept of social capital is useful for an analysis of the processes that sustain and reinforce the marginalisation of refugees. For example, the concept in the form developed by Bourdieu and Putnam shows how refugees can rely on fellow nationals to find the best language course but may not know anyone to ask about the tacit rules and procedures of the educational system. This limits their capacities for pursuing careers beyond those of un-skilled or semi-skilled work (Morris 2007). For the purposes of this study, the concept of social capital is helpful for understanding how mechanisms of marginalisation and exclusion are overcome through social capital enhancing processes taking place at the folk high school.

Bourdieu defined social capital as 'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words to membership in a group' (Bourdieu 1986 p. 248). Bourdieu focused on how the interplay between economic, cultural and social capital contributed to perpetual social inequalities, describing social capital as the resources, which facilitate the actualisation of the other forms of capital. For example, cultural capital in the form of academic credentials can be more easily put to use and yield economic profit by way of social networks (Bourdieu 1977). In this context, the concept of habitus is important. Habitus is the result of socialisation and constitutes a set of dispositions mediating between objective social position and subjective agency (Bourdieu 1989). In an educational setting, this implies that middle class students, by virtue of their social position, possess a habitus, which makes them better accustomed to the norms and tacit rules of the educational system than their working class peers. Following this, middle class students are more likely to succeed academically (Bourdieu 1977). This makes the application of Bourdieu's concepts of social capital and habitus highly relevant to recently arrived refugees.

Newcomers simply do not have access to the same relationships or the same understanding of practices, values and norms that the ethnic majority in the country of residence does (Morrice 2007).

An important contribution to social capital theory is Putnam's (2000) distinction between *bonding* and *bridging* social capital. Bonding social capital refers to the ties between people who are socio-demographically similar, such as close family or co-ethnics. Bridging social capital pertains to the ties to members of other social groups. Whereas bonding social capital is 'exclusive' and tends to reinforce homogeneity in groups, bridging social capital is 'inclusive' as it facilitates wider social identities and fosters a greater sense of reciprocity between groups (Putnam 2000). Putnam argues that bonding social capital is helpful for 'getting by', while bridging social capital is fundamental for 'getting ahead' (Putnam 2000 p. 23). This idea has been further elaborated by Woolcock who has pointed to the significance of ties to members of other social groups as they enable individuals to draw on resources and knowledge not easily accessible within their own immediate social environment (Woolcock 2001 cited in Field 2003). As we will argue in the following, folk high schools are social sites with a strong potential for facilitating refugees' access to such resources, knowledge and ideas previously out of their reach. Furthermore, the folk high schools serve as points of access to especially bridging social capital as they bring together young people from different backgrounds in an educational and residential community based on mutual obligations.

A final perspective on social capital, which is valuable to the following analysis, is Field's examination of the relationship between social capital and interethnic trust. Reviewing the social capital literature, Field suggests that individuals feel more confident in predicting the behaviour of people who they perceive to be similar to them and, hence, they tend to show a lesser amount of trust-based behaviour when interacting with people of a different ethnic background. Consequently, community and mutuality, that is, social capital, within ethnic groups are strengthened but such strong networks are also likely to promote ethnic inequalities (Field 2003). For refugee newcomers, this may be a disadvantage in particular since they often do not have access to the wider social networks from which they can benefit (Morrice 2007).

It is important to recognise that bonding and bridging social capital are not mutually exclusive and that social networks within ethnic groups can provide refugees and immigrants with important resources and support (Putnam 2004; Ryabov 2009; Larsen 2011a; Jørgensen 2017). Nevertheless,

Morrice has emphasised how, from a social capital perspective, refugees often end up caught in a 'circle of disadvantage' (Morrice 2007 p. 168). They need bridging social capital to access valuable sources of knowledge and skills that can help them escape marginalised positions and social isolation. Yet, the confidence and capacity to acquire bridging social capital is largely appropriated through bridging social relationships to begin with. To address this paradox, Morrice concludes by calling for informal, social and community based learning opportunities, which acknowledge the structural inequalities affecting refugees, validate their experiences and identities, and help refugee and non-refugee communities find common purpose (Morrice 2007 p. 168f). In the following, we will argue that the folk high school may serve as a learning opportunity, which, due to its organisation and values, facilitates processes that help tackling the paradox of access to bridging social capital for newly resettled refugees.

Methods

The first author generated the empirical data in the Spring of 2017, deploying a qualitative case study approach. For two weeks, ASB stayed and carried out fieldwork at a folk high school in rural Denmark, which had a focus on physical education, arts and intercultural encounters. The school constituted an *extreme case* (Flyvbjerg 2006) from two perspectives: (1) It is one of few folk high schools in Denmark where the proportion of refugee students makes up more than 20% of the student body; (2) the school has it as an aim to contribute to refugee integration through positive interethnic relationships. Thus, this school served our purpose of investigating measures that educational institutions can take to support newcomer refugees. During fieldwork, ASB carried out participant observation (including spontaneous, unstructured field interviews), two focus group discussions (one with Danish students and one with refugee students) and ten individual in-depth qualitative interviews. Interviews were conducted with the principal, the vice principal, four students with a refugee background and four majority ethnic Danish students (henceforth referred to as 'Danish students'). The students interviewed were 18 to 25 years old and included seven young men and one young woman. The refugees originated from four different countries and their length of stay in Denmark ranged from nine months to two years (Table 1). One refugee student had arrived as an unaccompanied minor, and only one, out of the four, had relatives in Denmark.

[insert Table 1]

Combining participant observation and interviews allowed a multi-faceted exploration of everyday practices at the school, an understanding of the values informing the school's engagement in refugee integration as well as the students' motivations for attending the school and their experiences of their everyday lives. Furthermore, the focus groups provided knowledge of the ways in which the students collectively constructed understandings of life at the school. Having initially introduced [him/herself] as a researcher, and having explained the purpose of the study, ASB sought to approximate a 'student-like' role in her interaction with the residents and employees of the school, mainly engaging in the same activities as the students. This was due to an interest in obtaining the deepest possible insight into life at the school from a student perspective since the students had the most direct experiences with the school's ambitions of facilitating positive peer relationships. However, ASB being a white, majority ethnic female, we acknowledge that this may have influenced access to particular kinds of student experiences. As she represented the ethnic majority of the society that the refugees attended the school to learn about, it is likely that they may have withheld some criticisms or negative experiences of life at the folk high school.

The strategy for participant observation and writing of field notes was inspired by Madden's notion of the 'systematic eye' (Madden 2010 p. 101), focusing on places and their influence on interaction; people's actions; norms and rules guiding actions (or being broken); the duration/frequency and rhythm of activities; the researcher's actions and how the participants responded to them. In all activities outside the classrooms, field notes were recorded post hoc as soon as possible after an interaction had ended. By avoiding passive observation as far as possible, ASB sought to reduce the distance between her and the participants and was able to engage more spontaneously in various interactions.

All interviews lasted between one and two hours and were conducted face-to-face in Danish. In order to develop rapport with the students and to follow their everyday lives, it was considered important to be able to interact without the involvement of interpreters. Also, having Danish as a common language in the focus group that included refugees with various first languages formed the basis of a more dynamic discussion. The conduct of the interviews with the refugee students in Danish may however have caused a loss of information since Danish was not their first language.

The individual interviews were semi-structured. They were based on an overall set of questions and themes but their conversational nature allowed participants to talk freely, possibly bringing up unexpected perspectives. The interviews with the students revolved around their motivations for attending the folk high school; negative and positive aspects of everyday life at the school; thoughts about successful refugee integration; and, for the refugee students, their aspirations for their future in Denmark. Discussions with the principals focused on the values of the school and their experiences of working with refugees within the context of the folk high school system. The conduct of the study was based on voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality. Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Immediately after the interviews, field notes on the context and social interaction were written down. All participants have been assigned pseudonyms.

To increase the validity of the findings, preliminary interpretations of observations, interviews and conversations were discussed with the participants during the fieldwork (Shenton 2004). The post-fieldwork analytical process began with reading the individual interviews and field notes, gradually developing a coding frame for a cross-sectional labelling of text segments of interest to the research question (Mason 2002). Inspired by Attride-Stirling's (2001) approach to thematic network analysis, the codes were then grouped in basic themes representing patterns of meaning across the interviews and field notes (i.e., 'learning from Danish peers' or 'exchanging practices'). The relationships between these were further explored, leading to the collation of the basic themes in organising theme clusters of basic themes related to similar issues. The connection of the organising themes eventually led to the formation of a global theme, namely 'School practices and processes promoting refugee integration through social capital'. While the global theme unified the analysis, the organising themes came to constitute the sub-headings structuring the following presentation of the findings.

Findings

Maintaining an Inclusive School Ethos
In accounting for the values informing the folk high school's involvement in refugee integration, the school management referred to the history of the Danish folk high school as an institution supporting marginalised groups. Here, the concept of 'civic education' outlined above – that is, the passing on of knowledge, which enables societal participation – played a key role. The principal, Jens,

highlighted the folk high schools' past engagement in educating the rural population of Denmark in the 19th and early 20th century when explaining the school's present work with refugee students:

'It is a task for us to make sure that people gain a foothold in this society and which particular group would that be? That would currently be refugees. They are the vulnerable ones. It was the same in the early history of folk high schools but, back then, it was the peasantry […] We involved the peasantry and sought to upgrade their skills, to provide them with an educational background. And it is this education and knowledge of different issues that we would also like to establish with the students coming here today.'

Thus, taking care of and educating refugees to facilitate their participation in society were framed as an important responsibility of the folk high school with reference to its history of helping the peasantry become educated and actively involved citizens. Concerning the expectations for refugees' participation in Danish society, both Jens and the vice principal, Thomas, emphasised that societal participation does not imply the refugee students' total assimilation. As outlined by Thomas, the school's approach was based on the assumption that 'it is possible for people to integrate what they come from with what they encounter later on'. The instruction and daily activities at the school were clearly informed by democratic principles and norms of equality, which the participants – refugees as well as Danes – often talked about as distinctly 'Danish'. At the same time, the school celebrated the diversity of its student body. Non-Danish students were not expected to abandon their practices but were encouraged to preserve them and share them with the other students. This included anything from inviting other students to join in shisha-smoking or giving a talk about one's country of origin to cooking national favourite dishes for others to taste. In general, Thomas explained, the school was dedicated to creating an atmosphere where all students felt welcome and valued:

'One has to be met with a feeling of being unconditionally welcome here […] it is an issue in society in general that some people do not feel welcome. We would like to establish a counterculture to that and say, 'great, man, welcome to this place!' So our approach is that we see people as human beings and nothing else. The most important thing is that you are human, you are very welcome here and we care about you.'

The vice principal's emphasis on making all students feel welcome and valued regardless of their backgrounds and initial prerequisites is critical from a social capital perspective. Seeking to prepare refugees for life in Denmark while also catering to other young people exploring their aspirations for the future, the school constituted an important initial point of access for the refugees to form bonds and obtain resources not available in their immediate environments. As the above quote from Thomas indicates, the school wished to cultivate an inclusive ethos, contrasting the existing political and public discourses in Denmark, which widely construct refugees and other non-EU immigrants as a threat to social cohesion, economic stability and 'Danish culture' (Olwig 2011; Casey 2014; Hervik 2018; Hovden et al. 2018). With this inclusive school ethos, the school can be viewed as an institution, which lowered some of the barriers to bridging social capital that refugees may face as newcomers.

Developing Language Skills and Knowledge of Practices, Norms and Values

In accordance with the demands of the national policy for refugee integration programmes, the main learning objectives in the school's work with recently arrived refugees was to provide intensive instruction and training in Danish as a second language and to provide the refugee students with knowledge about Danish culture and society. Especially the language training played a central role as the refugees had about 12 hours of language instruction per week and the daily language of communication at the school was Danish. The interviewed refugees mentioned language acquisition as one of their main reasons for wanting to attend the folk high school. In Denmark, language training in municipal or private language centres is a part of the general integration programme for refugees. However, the refugee students found the instruction in these centres unambitious and considered a stay at the folk high school an opportunity to develop their language skills significantly. They emphasised the importance of improving their Danish for their future lives in Denmark:

> 'If we are to understand the culture or find a job, it is important to speak Danish. If you do not know Danish, you cannot do anything here in Denmark […] So, if one needs to talk to people or be polite or find a job, it is important to speak Danish.' (Adnan, refugee student)

Recalling that social capital facilitates the access to and creation of resources (Bourdieu 1986), the intensive language instruction laid an important foundation for refugee students' ability to benefit from their social relationships. Mastering the Danish language was thus particularly important to the

refugees because it facilitated the development of confidence in encounters with fellow students and the local population in general, e.g., talking to people and being polite. Furthermore, Adnan's statement illustrates how language skills became a critical tool for accessing resources such as employment opportunities. Intensive language instruction was thus a key element of the schools' practices generating bridging social capital (Putnam 2000). Additionally, practising Danish language through conversations in class as well as in informal conversations with fellow students outside class, contributed in itself to the formation of social bonds.

This was further supported by the school's focus on teaching refugees about cultural and societal matters in Denmark. The classes on Danish culture and society partly focused on concrete knowledge such as familiarity with the organization of the labour market, traditions and holidays, and famous artists and writers. However, the primary goal, which the management emphasised, was to help refugees familiarise themselves with the routine everyday practices and norms concerning social interaction in different situations. These, also according to the refugees themselves, sometimes differed from what they knew from their countries of origin.

The communication and appropriation of everyday practices and norms took place in class, e.g., through discussions of Danish youth culture and workplace hierarchies but it also unfolded outside the classroom in casual conversations between refugee students and Danish students in their spare time. Here, ASB observed how the students would discuss differences and similarities between their respective countries concerning topics such as gender norms, the educational system, and dating. The refugee students stressed the significance of living and socialising with Danish peers for gaining valuable knowledge:

> 'We can learn to understand each other and we can see which traditions they have and how they do different things, for example, how they eat different kinds of food. This is how we learn something from them.' (Haroon, refugee student)

> 'I would like to learn with Danish people. Because, when I am only with Danish people, I only speak Danish and get to know Danish culture. […] It is no good if I am only with people from my country. We end up speaking the same language and we do

not learn about Danish culture. I know Eritrean culture; I am not here to learn about Eritrean culture because I am already familiar with it.' (Ermias, refugee student)

As exemplified by Haroon above, the acquisition of knowledge about everyday practices happened not only through explicit articulation and discussion of cultural (dis)similarities but also by the refugees carefully observing their surroundings and reflecting on what they saw.

Thus, the folk high school facilitated refugees' access to valuable social settings where they could increase their knowledge of norms associated with the educational and occupational systems, learn how to decode other tacit norms present in social interaction and make Danish friends. From a social capital perspective, this is of critical importance. Following Field, the knowledge acquired from bonding ties such as those with co-ethnics is often insufficient for operating beyond the boundaries of the immediate ethnic community and, thereby, for acquiring the needed resources located outside of this community (Field 2005). As seen above, Ermias stated that his interest was in learning about Danish culture and language rather than exclusively socialising with fellow nationals at the school. Ermias' statement – as well as those put forth by Adnan about the importance of language skills – underlines the significance that the refugee students attributed to the formation of bridging social ties, or their desire for 'getting ahead' rather than 'getting by' (Putnam 2000). This dynamic was also reflected among the Danish students who emphasised the value of meeting peers from different backgrounds and learning about their experiences and perspectives.

While the school thus constituted an arena for the acquisition of valuable resources both inside and outside the classroom, there were diverging expectations among the students regarding the nature of their stay at the school. The Danish students stressed informal socializing and activities as a significant part of attending a folk high school. Such activities could include listening to music, building furniture for the common areas or doing volunteer work in the nearby town. Not all students with a refugee background were equally enthusiastic about these activities. As the school represented an important opportunity for developing language skills, some refugee students appeared to be more interested in the academic aspects of school life. This occasionally caused tension among the students:

'The students who are not entirely familiar with what a Danish folk high school means to Danish people may come here with the expectation that 'Now I just have to

be here and I have to learn a lot of Danish language and then I will go find a job and support myself'. And this sometimes causes some conflicts of interest where I would like to go out and do things, do something fun so I am not bored while some of the other students are more keen on just improving their Danish.' (Martin, Danish student)

These diverging expectations about what it means to attend a folk high school show how Danish integration policy manifested itself in the refugee students' daily lives. As becoming self-supporting through employment within a year is the main aim of the integration programme, refugee students had a very different starting point for attending the school than the majority ethnic Danes.

Nevertheless, by bringing together refugee young people and Danish peers and staff, the folk high school contributed to tackling the circle of disadvantage that refugees often encounter (Morrice 2007). Through language instruction as well as discussions between Danes and refugees in a safe social environment, the school provided initial access to the social relationships needed for developing the confidence and capacities to further acquire bridging social capital and overcome social isolation. In line with the school's ethos, the management and the teachers acknowledged the refugees' stay at the folk high school as a cultural learning process and took their time to discuss cultural differences. An example is Haroon's story of how a teacher had rehearsed a job interview with him. This gave him insights into the norms associated with the Danish labour market, which he considered an important resource for finding employment in the future. As teachers as well as Danish students supported the refugees in developing their knowledge of everyday life in Denmark, the refugee students' habitus gradually became attuned to their new surroundings (Bourdieu 1977, 1989).

Creating Bonds through Organised Activities

While the folk high school brought together Danish and refugee youth and facilitated the refugees' language acquisition, language barriers challenged successful social interaction and inclusion from time to time. In the interviews, most refugee students expressed their desire to improve their Danish further to be able to interact with Danish people even better. Furthermore, in the individual interviews

as well as the focus group, the Danish students all emphasised language barriers as a major challenge. Liv, a Danish student, explained:

'[…] Language is a common denominator for everything that is difficult. When a misunderstanding occurs, you cannot correct it or explain yourself. If there is a challenge, a conflict, it is difficult to just bury it because there is this linguistic challenge.'

Moreover, the Danish students argued that, even when conflict was not present, language barriers made it difficult to build close relationships. This also meant that they themselves were more inclined to talk and engage with the refugee students with better Danish or, alternatively, English language skills. Thus, language barriers constituted an obstacle to the formation of bridging social capital, especially for a few refugee students who only spoke very little Danish. However, many of the planned activities at the school were aimed at overcoming linguistic barriers to social interaction. This happened in the practical classes focusing on creative or physical skills that the Danish and refugee students attended together and in extra-curricular activities such as cultural and outdoor events. The vice principal explained that these activities were intended to promote interaction between students regardless of their different Danish language prerequisites by creating a sense of common purpose. The students generally expressed positive views toward the activities and emphasised their value in terms of creating bonds between students:

'In the elective and activity-based classes, for instance, I think it works pretty well because there are some physical things you can do and everyone knows how to run or chop some wood or whatever. And in the outdoor class which I am in, we are more or less equally inexperienced so it is pretty equal […] it is funny how language does not really matter in that context but, of course, it is the physical activity which is in focus rather than the verbal.' (Rasmus, Danish student)

'It is so exciting! We learn about nature and spend time in the woods. We go for walks, sometimes we run, yeah, so it is very exciting […] Outdoor classes help us feel good and a lot of students come together and have a good time and enjoy themselves and talk with each other.' (Sadiq, refugee student)

As Rasmus emphasised, the sense of a clearly defined common purpose in the activities enabled the students to interact as equals, regardless of language proficiency. In addition, Liv argued that many activities at the school were 'not particularly Danish', implying that 'particularly Danish' knowledge was not a necessity for joining in and that the refugees could draw on their existing skills. Thereby, in line with the school's inclusive ethos, the activities constituted a space for students to form social ties across gaps that might in other cases divide them. Such common activities outside the classroom have also been emphasized by Putnam (2004) as important to the formation of social capital in schools. Furthermore, as Sadiq stated, the activities helped the students connect and 'feel good'. This was supported by several observations at the school where the enjoyment of sports, games, cooking or dancing enabled interaction between students who were otherwise restricted in their verbal communication. Thus, the activities served as an initial meeting point laying the foundation for social bridging, which appeared to enhance feelings of connectedness and wellbeing among the students. As Jørgensen (2017) has argued in a study of peer social capital among immigrant and ethnic minority youth, the holistic goal of 'feeling well' can also be considered an important outcome of social capital.

The activities and practical classes at the school were not a part of the mandatory requirements for folk high schools stated in Danish integration policy. Nevertheless, they proved valuable to the social inclusion of the refugee students. The objectives of the integration programme were met through the courses on Danish language, society and culture but the additional activities at the school further helped promote wellbeing, social inclusion and social capital beyond the aims of the integration programme. As the activities were not 'particularly Danish', they helped integrate the whole student body, including those students who were most disadvantaged in terms of Danish language proficiency.

(Re)building Trust and Disproving Prejudice

Another way in which the folk high school promoted the inclusion of young refugees further than the stated objectives of national integration policy was in the establishment of mutual trust facilitated by the school ethos. According to the vice principal, an important aim was to help all students 'open up' to the world around them and engage with each other on a basis of mutual trust and respect. This ambition was observed in the organisation of the school, which was characterised by clear community-oriented values and predictable weekly routines. The students had a largely shared space

in a number of smaller living units, the majority of them shared a room with a roommate, they attended classes and activities together, ate together, cleaned together – all following a fixed weekly schedule based on mutual obligations. As a preparation for the weekly house meetings in each of the living units, the students took turns bringing snacks, made coffee and helped each other arrange the chairs for the meeting. All this happened without much discussion. Such predictable patterns have important implications for social capital. According to Field (2003), trust and bonds characterised by reciprocity and community are more easily formed between individuals who participate in routinized practices, making them able to predict the behaviour of others.

In line with this, the refugee students addressed the school's positive effect on their ability to open up to others and regain trust in the aftermath of flight. Haroon explained the changes he had experienced after coming to the folk high school:

> 'I had many bad experiences in Afghanistan and I was affected by that when I got here [to the school, ed.] […] I thought all people were bad people. I didn't like them. But when I met them and talked to them, I was able to understand them. I thought, 'No, these are good people'. […] Obviously, every country has good people and bad people but I have met good people at the folk high school and I will never forget them.'

Similarly, Sadiq emphasised the transition he had undergone. Before coming to the school, he would prefer to stay in his apartment and was, in his own words, 'afraid of meeting new people'. Now, he was known around the school as an outgoing person who liked to make things happen, he had made friends and was in the school's activities committee. As he expressed it, he was 'not the same person' as he was a year ago. From these accounts, the protective and value-based framework of the school appeared to have enabled the refugees to regain trust in other people and commit to social relationships. The school had no particular support arrangements in place for handling trauma and other mental health-related problems among students with a refugee background. Instead, it aimed at supporting the refugees by providing a framework for a 'normal' everyday life through the school community.

Trust and familiarity were also recurring themes among the Danish students. They expressed how, over the course of their stay at the school, they had overcome initial prejudice and had gained a more nuanced image of people with a refugee background. As Martin explained, the fear of asking the refugee students about their stories had also decreased. Anders, another Danish student, expressed the following view:

> 'Meeting actual people, to me it disproves all the negative prejudice that exists around refugees […] and being here has just confirmed to me that refugees are human beings. I know it sounds ridiculous that you don't realise this before you meet them but if you live all your life in Denmark and only hear about refugees on the news or in *Den Korte Avis* [far right-wing news blog, ed.] or whatever news people read, you don't have knowledge of the actual human beings. Then you're only familiar with a negative categorisation of a lot of different people.'

Hence, the temporal, spatial and normative organisation of the folk high school formed a supportive basis for refugees with experiences of war and flight. It enabled students to approach each other with mutual understanding rather than mistrust or prejudice. Recalling Field's (2003) overview of the literature on social capital, trust and ethnic inequalities, the folk high school helped the students overcome the barriers to interethnic trust. Through their trust-based relationships with Danish peers, the refugees gained access to a number of 'potential and actual resources' (Bourdieu 1986) located outside their own ethnic groups, such as Danish language homework support and knowledge of everyday life in Denmark. As exemplified by Haroon and Sadiq, these relationships also contributed to psychosocial wellbeing and the feeling of being surrounded by 'good people'. In this way, too, the folk high school served to counteract the obstacles to social inclusion often facing recently arrived refugees (Morrice 2007).

Notwithstanding these advantages of the school community, it also appeared that the expectation of sustained commitment to the school's routines was difficult to live up to for some of the refugee students. ASB observed that a few students would opt out of regular activities, explaining that they were too tired or had a stomachache. As a teacher remarked during a field interview, students who suffer psychologically may sometimes see little sense in participating in the chores and activities constituting the school community. Their minds are elsewhere. They may prefer to stay in their rooms

and follow the news about their countries of origin or communicate with their loved ones back home via Skype or WhatsApp. Thus, while the mutual obligations at the folk high school appeared to be healing for some, other refugee students may have a need for mental health support and psychological healing before being able to benefit fully from the school community.

Discussion

Our research sought to explore the role of a Danish folk high school in creating an environment conducive for the psychosocial wellbeing and integration of recently arrived young refugees. Social capital theory stipulates that individuals may benefit from engagement in networks of social relations and recognition, assisting them in 'getting ahead' (Putnam 2000), or, in our research, gaining the best possible means to integrate and start anew in Denmark. While the folk high school is an actor in an integration programme dominated by an employment-oriented agenda, it also supported social and wellbeing-related integration processes, which included building trust. Since increased employability and wellbeing are mutually linked (OECD/European Union 2015), the folk high school programme may even accelerate the integration process. Wellbeing is a prerequisite for active participation in society and good wellbeing affects the degree and manner of engagement with society: healthier immigrants are able to work and earn more and can build broader social networks. Fuller integration in turn improves health outcomes (Union 2015) or vice versa more unemployment in refugees is associated with poor health (Wiggen 2014). Furthermore, a number of studies have identified immigrant participation in civil society organizations to facilitate wellbeing and integration, e.g. in relation to national language skills and strengthened education and job opportunities (Dahl 2005, Fridberg 2014, Østergaard 2015, Lecerof, Stafstrom et al. 2016, Research 2016). Thus, we argue that the folk high schools offer a more holistic integration effort and fills out some of the gaps in the general integration programme.

We identified many interconnected ways in which the folk high school generated social capital. In the interest to help frame future analysis and action for school settings that provide young refugees with the best possible means for integration and psychosocial growth, we will now draw on our findings to delineate four school resources that we observed to be instrumental to the generation of social capital.

One resource was the intensive *language instruction* at offer. While we acknowledge the value of schools recognising refugees' own linguistic backgrounds, and that refugee students may in some cases feel overly pressured to learn the school language (Thommessen and Todd 2018), our data reflected an eagerness among the young refugees of mastering the local language. They felt that improving their Danish language skills enabled them to interact more confidently and independently with the majority population, to build a social network in Denmark and improve their chances of succeeding in education and employment.

A second resource pertained to how the school actively nurtured *interethnic relationships* and mutuality. These relationships not only helped the refugees practice their Danish, but also improved their understanding of tacit social codes, and general knowledge of life in Denmark. Both Fazel (2015) and Pastoor (2017) have demonstrated the desire of young refugees to build friendships and relationships of mutual recognition with majority ethnic peers, highlighting the linguistic and cultural gains, as well as the sense of belonging this provides. While these interethnic relationships were promoted through activities and informal socialising, we also found that the school's expectations of students to contribute to school life facilitated a sense of *collective responsibility,* requiring students to work together under well-defined and predictable conditions. This we consider a third resource. We noted how the student's duties and service to the school helped the refugees establish a sense of trust in other people, and generally facilitated reciprocity of care and a mutual understanding among students of different backgrounds. The routinized and community-oriented organisation of the folk high school appeared to have the potential for restoring the damaged sense of trust in other people, which some young refugees experience (Ni Raghallaigh 2014; Eide et al. 2018).

A fourth school resource that we observed to generate social capital was the *inclusive school ethos,* which permeated the school setting. This property served as a particularly important catalyst for mobilising the other resources. The school emphasised openness to all students regardless of their backgrounds, encouraging diversity. At the same time, it enabled a sense of community among the students who were all on the cusp of adulthood, juggling decisions and aspirations for the future. Thus, the school ethos allowed the students to learn from each other and negotiate differences and similarities, forming social ties along the way.

These four school-based resources, or elements, demonstrate the refugee competence of the folk high school under study. The social capital enhancing processes unfolding in our school case study provided young refugees with some of the social resources and skills needed to 'get ahead' in their integration journey. The school's residential, community and educational arrangements were helpful in overcoming obstacles to social inclusion due to poor language proficiency (Valenta 2008), unfamiliarity with everyday practices (Valenta 2008; Larsen 2011a) and the separation from established social networks (Montgomery 2008; Cheung and Phillimore 2014; Vervliet et al. 2014; Pastoor 2015).

These findings must be considered in the light of some study limitations. The selection of refugee study participants with good Danish language skills may have contributed to a selection bias, as may the fact that all refugee research participants were male. The absence of female participants stems from practical circumstances, as there were no female refugee students at the school until three women joined the class a few days before the end of fieldwork. While the refugee group reflects the gender distribution among recent 18-to-29-old refugees to Denmark (Statistics Denmark 2016), the lack of female refugee perspectives is likely to leave out important aspects. Furthermore, it is difficult for us to ascertain the sustainability or the long-term implications of the social capital generated in the school setting for integration and psychosocial well-being. Thus, the question of how the refugees may mobilize or benefit from the social capital gained through the four school resources after leaving the school outlines an avenue for future research.

Implications for policy and practice

The informal character of the folk high school, the absence of formal exams and state-mandated learning objectives, coupled with its residential arrangements and historical philosophy, makes our case study truly unique and radically different from, for example, public primary and secondary schools. This begs the question: How feasible is it to expect more mainstream educational institutions to take heed of our findings? A number of commentators argue that schools are well placed to support and sustain the wellbeing and social inclusion of young refugees. They have highlighted how formal school contexts can facilitate social bonding through informal activities, which help students break the ice and find common purpose (Fazel 2015; Due and Riggs 2016); through training initiatives for school staff (Block et al. 2014); or tutoring or buddy arrangements between refugee and non-refugee students (Hek 2005; Rah 2007; Due and Riggs 2016). However, studies have also noted a number of

barriers to school support for refugee students. Insufficient knowledge of the refugees' current situation and backgrounds, insensitivity towards their needs, as well as negative nationalist discourses on refugees can hamper schools' abilities to offer support (Pastoor 2015; Thommessen and Todd 2018). This may be reflected in refugee students' experiences of racist bullying and unaccommodating attitudes of some teachers (Hek 2005; Oxman-Martinez and Choi 2014).

A recent special issue draws attention to some of the opportunities and challenges associated with the trend of charging schools with the responsibility of addressing complex social problems faced by vulnerable children and youth (Skovdal and Campbell 2015). While sympathetic to the support and care potential of schools, the editors 'caution against earmarking schools and teachers as actors responsible for ameliorating the impacts of complex social problems in the absence of efforts to embed schools in supportive local community, national, and global responses to support such a trend' (ibid.). Efforts to build refugee competent schools must be done with a recognition of the support, resources and policies that might optimise the likelihood of formal educational institutions playing an active role in generating the kind of social capital young refugees need to 'get ahead'. Relatedly, Bentsen et al (2018) warn against 'adding on' to school-based activities, and argue that wellbeing promoting initiatives must be embedded within school life as 'add-ins'. Promoting the four school resources identified in this study in formal educational settings would thus entail both an acknowledgement of the pressures schools are under and a consideration of how the four resources can be embedded into existing practices or infrastructures. In the absence of support, we recommend that school leadership endorse an inclusive school ethos and devise strategies for tweaking current teaching styles and methods so that existing school activities nurture positive cross-cultural relationships and a sense of collective responsibility.

Conclusion

Through a case study of an informal residential college for young adults, we have identified four school-based resources that we believe demonstrate the potential for school settings to generate much needed social capital for young refugees. We believe important lessons can be learned from our findings, transcending the individual research site, and argue that formal educational institutions can become 'refugee competent' when supported to i) facilitate language acquisition; ii) nurture positive interethnic relationships; iii) foster a sense of collective responsibility at the school through activity and services; and iv) actively promote an inclusive school ethos.

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