A photograph of a man with a beard and dark hair, wearing a blue shirt, looking down at a smartphone in his hands. He is standing in front of a modern brick building with several windows. To the right, a black signpost holds a triangular warning sign with a red border and a white background showing two black silhouettes of children walking, and a rectangular sign below it with the word "Skole" (School) in white text on a black background. The scene is outdoors, and the ground is paved with some fallen leaves.

“Education is a protection”: Refugee Parents’ Involvement in their Children’s’ Schools

**A Case Study of Refugees in Towns
Aarhus, Denmark**

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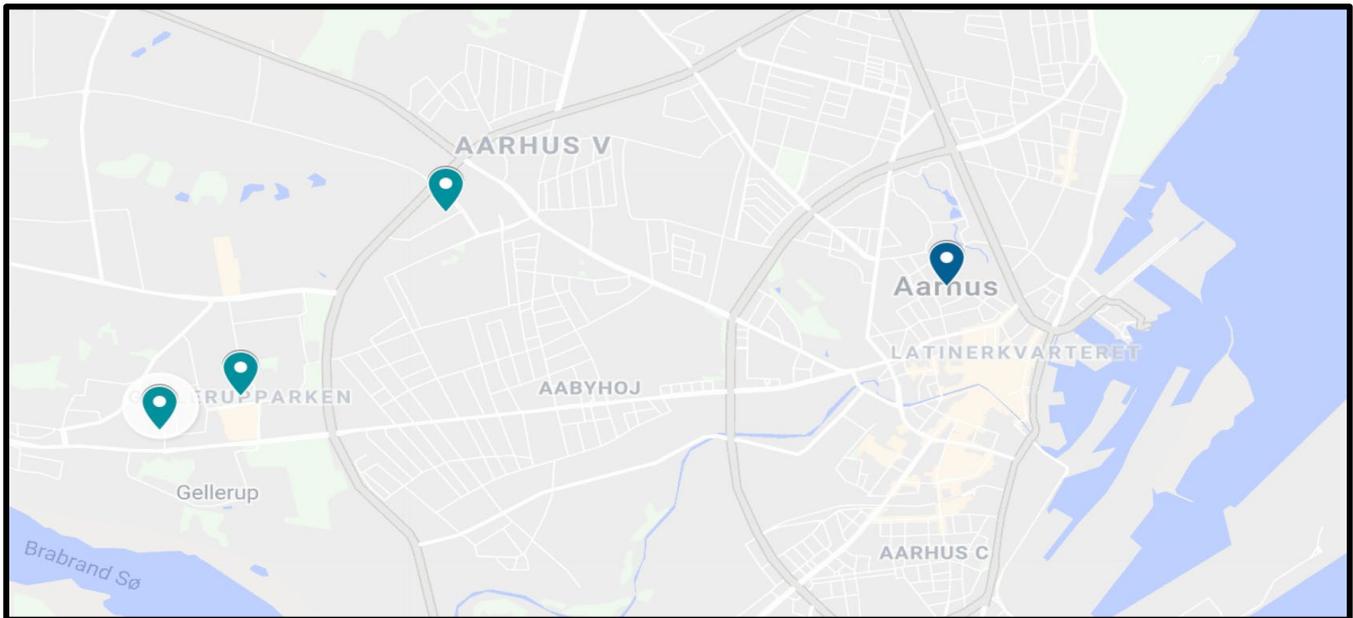
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Cover photo: The challenge of communicating through an app with the school while talking to teachers is little or limited. Photo by Jørgen Bundgaard.

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Location



Aarhus is Denmark's second largest city, on the east coast of the Jutland peninsula. It has a population of 336,411, of which almost sixteen percent are immigrants. Thirty percent of Denmark's immigrants and their descendants live in Aarhus or Copenhagen. Aarhus formulated an integration policy in 2007, which was revised in 2011 and 2012. This policy set integration goals for the municipality which is responsible for finding permanent accommodation for the refugees.

Many immigrants cluster in the three "ghetto" neighborhoods of Aarhus in light blue, distant from the city center in dark blue: (from left to right): Børnehaven Skovgårdsparken, Gellerupparken, and Bispehaven. Base map imagery © Google 2019.

Introduction

Many refugees make the difficult choice to leave their homes without their families and bring them later through legal means. They take that risk because the journey is too dangerous for children. Once they reach safety, they struggle for family reunification, not an easy process. In 2015, I launched a local initiative in the city of Aarhus, Denmark, called Anaobaba.tv. I tried to support refugee parents waiting to reunify with their families. The project was through of an NGO called *Sager Der Samler* and was funded by the municipality of Aarhus. Most of the participants were eventually reunified with their families and the project ended, but Anaobaba.tv has become a community for parents and their children.

When we get together as a group, mostly we talk about our children. The conversation starts with, "How is it going with the kids in school and the daycare center?" It is difficult to raise children in a new country and culture. But there's a glimmer of hope. Refugee parents I meet in Aarhus strongly believe that education is a healer and that education benefits all who have access to it.

"Education heals the wounds and reduces suffering. Education is a protection," said Farah, 34 years, a mother of three in Aarhus. Refugee parents work to motivate their kids and promote the value of education. Fortunately, in Denmark it is important for parents to be involved in their children's education, so in this regard, refugees and hosts are already on the same page.

A Note on Methods

This report draws on official statistics and policy documents on refugee resettlement in Denmark, and on informal and interpersonal interactions I had with the host population and refugee parents in Aarhus. I asked about the challenges refugee parents face raising their children often alone in a new country. The refugees I talked to mostly came to Denmark during the last ten years. As a refugee father, I am part of a wide range of refugee parents besides Anaobaba.tv community.

I explained to the refugee parents that if they agreed to share their information, all quotations would be anonymous (all names used here are pseudonyms). As a refugee in Denmark, I understood the realities of the parents I talked to and their attitudes towards education. However, some parents did not want to speak out about Danish policies so I did not always get a full answer from them. Many think that they are powerless, unwelcome and unheard.

The Author's Position in Aarhus

I, Abdullah, moved to Aarhus in 2015 from Syria where I had worked as a lawyer, and for the United Nations Development Program as a field coordinator before and during the war. In Denmark, I work on initiatives that focus on welcoming refugees, integration, advocacy and promoting democracy. In 2020 I completed my master's degree in International Studies from Aarhus University.

Refugee Students in Denmark

Denmark is a family-friendly country. Danes treat their kids respectfully and encourage them to act like kids. Kids are just kids which is quite different from my home country Syria where we teach the kids to think and behave like adults. All children in Denmark are guaranteed a place in a childcare institution, and almost all Danish families use child daycare. Children receive ten years of compulsory education starting at age six: a one-year preschool class, nine years of primary and lower secondary education plus an optional tenth year. Most Danish children attend municipal primary and lower secondary school, which is free, but there are also many private and independent schools where parents pay tuition fees (Life in Denmark a, 2020).

Before enrolling in schools, refugees' children (and all children with Danish as a second language) undergo language screening by Aarhus municipality. After the test, it is decided whether the child needs language support to ensure that all children have good Danish-language development (Hvid, 2018). But according to child and youth counselor Thomas Medom, in Aarhus the municipality, host population and parents are not doing enough; there are still too many children who do not speak age-appropriate Danish when they start school, largely because refugee children are raised in homes where no Danish is spoken. So, a large percentage of bilingual children need added language support (Hvid, 2018).

Ida, a teacher, thinks it can be a challenge for teachers to have refugee students in their classes. "There is both a cultural and linguistic barrier that makes it difficult to make expectations clear," she said. Ida thinks that for the parents, "It can be scary to send their child into a school when it is unknown territory for them... the child will be in the middle of two cultures, with both cultures making specific demands in regard to behavior."

Language Barriers

Most refugee parents finish the Danish language course and are able to use their Danish in everyday life, especially in schools. But they face communication challenges when dealing with the teachers. Some parents I interviewed said sometimes they don't understand the teachers or school workers when the conversations get complicated but hesitate to ask them to repeat what they said and feel ashamed that their Danish is not good enough.

Marwa, a 28-year-old mother said:

When I pick my son up from the SFO (*Skolefritidsordning*, the daycare for young students before and after school), I ask how was my son? Usually, the SFO worker starts to speak quickly. Mostly I understand the beginning of what she said, then I get lost, but I keep saying 'Ja Ja' [Yes in Danish] then I leave. After leaving, I realized that I didn't understand what she said [laughter].

When I attend my children's parent meetings, I can't always follow what the teachers say. A teacher told me that if I didn't understand something I could ask. But I know that if I ask about what I don't understand, my questions will lengthen the meeting, and it will be unfair for other parents. Some other parents try to help with some explanations, but I can't ask other parents for everything. People in Denmark are mostly busy, and it is not their responsibility.

Aula

Parents in Denmark communicate with teachers and employees of the primary schools and daycare through an app called Aula. According to their website:

Aula is an easily accessible and safe tool that makes it easy and clear for parents to take part in the kid's everyday life and development. The goal of Aula is to create space for better communication between the institution and the home.

However, refugee parents find the Aula app difficult to figure out. The app is in Danish. Some use translation, but these are often incomplete. The app has too much information and refugees don't know what the most important parts are to focus on. Most read their private messages, but they miss a lot of information about what is going on in school due to lack of understanding. Jamil, a 43-year-old father of four kids said:

When I look at Aula, I see the screen as if it was full of strange symbols [laughter]. I try hard to find something to understand. I missed an important meeting last time and a very beautiful event earlier. It was very embarrassing and disappointing for me.

Most refugee parents prefer to speak directly with teachers rather than communicating through Aula. This is easier in daycare, but in schools refugee parents find it difficult to talk to the teachers in the morning because the teachers are too busy, and they don't have the chance to speak with teachers when they pick their kids up either. This leaves parents puzzled as to when the best time to talk with their kids' parents is.

Some refugee parents experience a new liberal way of teaching at the schools that influences their role of supporting learning at home. Schools in their countries of origin were serious and rigid places. In Denmark, schools are more open and fun. That makes it difficult for them to evaluate how much their kids are learning and how fast. Fadia, a 39-year-old mother of two kids said:

I used to check the school schedule and see what my girl must prepare for the next day. That was a concrete task. Today, I am lost. It is more liberal and fun. It is not that compulsory. I like it, but I don't know exactly when I should be straight and when I should be flexible.

Danish parents often organize activities after school or during the weekends, such as parties or eating together. These activities are a great opportunity for parents to talk, share and learn from each other about their involvement in their kids' school. Some refugee parents don't understand the purpose of these events. Some are busy with the family and adapting to their new surroundings, and some are not

confident because of their weak Danish or English language skills. There are missed opportunities for them to be involved and to get inspired.

Meeting in the Middle

Refugee parents believe that education holds value for their families. They work hard to promote the importance of school and learning, but they are unable to be involved in their kids' school as much as they would like to be. I had similar difficulties when my oldest daughter started school. My wife and I got lost with all the letters we received about the first day. We got there without a full understanding of the plan. The school team welcomed us with lovely big smiles, but everything was in Danish, so we were lost until one of the other parents brought her chair to us and said, "Do you need help with translation?"

Our first impression of our child's school was that they were not prepared for refugee parents and students. At the beginning of my daughter's schooling, I felt excluded from the school for a while. I thought that I was unheard, and the teachers ignored me and favored other parents over me. I decided to examine those feelings and see if they were really happening. I wrote the teachers, and I didn't get a response. I wrote the school principal and explained my experience with the teachers. The principal was positive and decisive and arranged a meeting with my daughter's teachers, my wife and me, and an interpreter. We sat and talked. We heard from them, and they heard from us. We learned that they are interested in communication between us and a good relationship. My wife and I thought that they heard our voice and got our message that we want to be involved better. That was a perfect solution for us.

Refugee parents and teachers see their differences as a problem rather than as an opportunity for creating inclusive solutions and promoting justice in schools and society. Refugee parents don't speak up, and the teachers don't act unless the parent requests help.

Refugee parents and schoolteachers also face the challenge of social exclusion and rejection from the Danish government. In the past five years Danish policies have become openly hostile towards refugees, and refugee parents worry about their families' futures. They do not understand how much to integrate and whether they will stay in Denmark or whether they will be expelled by a new law one day. The recent politics generate feelings of anger, sadness and loss, which affect their focus and disables ideas or initiatives from both sides. Some refugees have tried to leave Denmark and apply for asylum in other countries, but most failed due to the laws of the European Union. They returned to Denmark and struggled to get involved again in their kids' school. Fahed, a 31-year-old father of two kids said, "We were totally desperate and afraid of deportation. We tried to search for hope elsewhere, but unfortunately, we failed, and we wasted a lot of time. Our kids missed a lot of classes anyway, does anyone care about us?"

I struggled to stay involved when dealing with these outside pressures. How can I start anything in the direction of integration while I am receiving daily reminders that I am not welcome, and I have no future in Denmark from the government? Refugee parents spend a lot of time discussing plans and dreams of

leaving Denmark, even though this is impossible with EU laws and other international agreements that leave refugees stranded.

Some Suggestions

Schools are where integration challenges and inclusion opportunities get highlighted. The gap between refugee parents, school administrators, and teachers is vast. Refugee parents need to speak out and express their problems and needs, and school leaders and teachers need to include these parents to guarantee an understanding for both parents and teachers. I've learned that we as refugees in a new country should speak out instead of believing that the host population already is aware of our challenges.

Refugee parents need to have an orientation meeting about the school system, Aula and the importance of parental involvement in Denmark. They need an explanation of the year's plan and to discuss their role as a parent, how they can support their kids, what their tasks are specifically and what the teachers expect of them. A teacher friend said a meeting where the teacher visits the family before the refugee child starts in school could help make everybody feel better about the situation. As a parent myself, when I invited the daycare workers of my youngest daughter to my home, it led to a good relationship and communication.

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About the RIT Project

The **Refugees in Towns (RIT)** project promotes understanding of the migrant/refugee experience in urban settings. Our goal is to understand and promote refugee integration by drawing on the knowledge and perspective of refugees and locals to develop deeper understanding of the towns in which they live. The project was conceived and is led by Karen Jacobsen. It is based at the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University and funded by the Henry J. Leir Foundation.

Our goals are twofold

Our first long-term goal is to build a theory of integration from the ground up by compiling a global database of case studies and reports to help us analyze and understand the process of immigrant/refugee integration. These cases provide a range of local insights about the many different factors that enable or obstruct integration, and the ways in which migrants and hosts co-exist, adapt, and struggle in urban spaces. We draw our cases from towns in resettlement countries, transit countries, and countries of first asylum around the world.

Our second more immediate goal is to support community leaders, aid organizations, and local governments in shaping policy, practice, and interventions. We engage policymakers and community leaders through town visits, workshops, conferences, and participatory research that identifies needs in their communities, encourages dialogue on integration, and shares good practices and lessons learned.

Why now?

The United States—among many other refugee-hosting countries—is undergoing a shift in its refugee policy through travel bans and the suspension of parts of its refugee program. Towns across the U.S. are responding in different ways: some resist national policy changes by declaring themselves “sanctuary cities,” while others support travel bans and exclusionary policies. In this period of social and political change, we seek to deepen our understanding of integration and the ways in which refugees, migrants, and their hosts interact. Our RIT project draws on and gives voice to both refugees and hosts in their experiences with integration around the world.

For more on RIT

On our website, there are many more case studies and reports from other towns and urban neighborhoods around the world, and we regularly release more reports as our project develops.

www.refugeesintowns.org

About the Author

Abdullah has a master's degree in International Studies from Aarhus University, Denmark. Previously, he was a lawyer, certified by Damascus University and specializing in Children's Rights. He is passionate in bringing different cultures together and advocating for equality and justice for disadvantaged people.

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Refugees in Towns is a project of the Feinstein International Center. More information on the project, including more case study reports, is available at <https://www.refugeesintowns.org/>

The Feinstein International Center is a research and teaching center based at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University. Our mission is to promote the use of evidence and learning in operational and policy responses to protect and strengthen the lives, livelihoods, and dignity of people affected by or at risk of humanitarian crises.

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