

Finding rest in your mother language

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Abstract:

Pictures of men, women and children in their pursuit of a better life across the Mediterranean, stuffed in wooden boats, have been almost daily news the last couple of years. But we really didn't understand the true meaning of these news, until the body of a little 4 year old boy was washed onto one of the shores in Turkey.

The photograph of little Aylan Kurdi in his blue shorts and red shirt changed the tone and approach in many countries to the migrant crisis that we have been witnessing the last 5 years. One of these countries that experienced a radical change almost overnight in the public opinion was Norway.

Norway is a small country in Scandinavia with a long story of migration and that holds high the values of human rights and dignity, especially when it comes to children – the next generation of tax-payers.

But the wave of migrants that hit the country in fall 2015 was rather unseen and pushed all the official institutions to the limit. Even The Multilingual Library in Oslo, a small national institution within the Oslo Public Library felt the heat when suddenly 8000 newcomers arrived to the country in a two months period of time.

Because when you get your entire life and future put on hold, maybe for a week, for a month or for a year and you have lost everything you've possessed and everything you did hold dearly, what can mean more than finding rest in what you still carry with you: your past, your identity: your mother language?

Keywords: newcomers, identity, mother language, children, integration

Norway is a small country in Scandinavia, with a population of 5 million inhabitants. It is still a rather homogenic society, with an immigrant population of 850.000 persons, or 16% of the population. It is substantially labor immigration from EU-countries such as Sweden, Lithuania and Poland that make the biggest part of the immigrant population, though an increasingly number of Syrian, Somali and Eritrean refugees are showing on the statistics. In Norway, we love our fjords and skiing, people have the Nordic charming personalities and a very strong sense of belonging. Which can be both an advantage but also a disadvantage for a newcomer.

2015 was a record year in Norway when it comes to refugees. There were 30.080 refugees registered during 2015 only. In a European context, that amount seems rather insignificant, but on the statistics on how many refugees a country had taken pr. one million inhabitants, Norway actually ranked fourth highest. When Norway started, as its neighboring countries, to close their largest borders, new routes were established. One of those routes that got international attention was the “Arctic route” through Russia, which again showed the despair and persistence of the refugees.

The asylum shelters in Norway are spread all around the country, from larger towns to rather remote places with small populations. Many Syrian refugees who came from Syrian towns like Aleppo or Damascus, the oldest populated city in the world - a city with 1.500.000 inhabitants, found themselves placed in an old hotel in the little town of Nesbyen with 3500 inhabitants. Bolkesjø, a little remote village of 40 people was about to get a gigantic asylum shelter that could house up to 500 persons. Strong reactions did occur – from both the inhabitants who feel overwhelmed and from the asylum seekers who find it rather hard to adapt in a conservative Norwegian environment.

Despite the wave of generosity and volunteering that ruled the country as the number of refugees kept on increasing, Norway got their first Minister of Migration and Integration from the right-wing populist Progress party. It didn't take long to see the outlines of that policy, especially when it came to language courses – a strong linguistic fundament being the key to entering any new society and work market. The amount of hours of free language courses was decreased from 250 hours to 175. A big report on how Norway was to face this large number of newcomers and to integrate them was elaborated, and the public libraries were mentioned specifically in the process of these newcomers becoming “one of us”. In Norway, nobody likes to speak about multiculturalism. There is an ambivalent – lightly schizophrenic relation to how we want these persons to adapt and become “one of us”. Keeping your culture and identity, maintaining your mother language is a very important aspect that no one would publicly deny, but still the society will expect that you comply to all the Norwegian social and cultural norms, which sometimes can be difficult to balance for a Norwegian to-be.

Public libraries are micro societies that reflect the common social norms in a country. In Norway, we often refer to “the social contract” as one of the keys to Norway's prosperity and developed democracy. Everybody has rights and duties and has a responsibility to maintain and live up to them. The fact that the public libraries are free of charge, information is available for everyone and a place where everybody is met equally is an introduction to that social contract. Language cafés at the local public libraries have been very popular in Norway especially when the hours of Norwegian courses were decreased. But a widely publicized research made by Jamie Johnson, PhD Candidate at Oslo and Akershus University College,

showed that it wasn't only for the language skills people would attend: to see the acceptance and to actually speak and to socialize with a common Norwegian was far more important. Learning social and cultural codes is as important as learning the language and many expressed that that was the missing link in the traditional Norwegian language course which they would find at their public libraries. Public libraries in Norway are ruled by the Public library Act, which specifically states that any user has the right to find literature in their own mother language. That puts multilingual library services in a privileged position, thus the expression of "finne hvile i ditt eget språk" - "finding rest in your mother language".

That is the main reason why the Multilingual Library, a national resource and reference center for multilingual and multicultural library services exists. We think of ourselves as a library for other libraries as we purchase and lend out books, DVD's, CD's and language courses to any ordering library in Norway in 64 languages. Speaking of language courses, they have been very much in demand with the arrival of many newcomers and the hours of free Norwegian courses dropping. Many public libraries cannot afford these expensive language courses so for the Multilingual Library to have them and lend them out to any person asking for them is the only option. We also elaborate cultural travelling exhibitions that have a sole purpose of promoting the multicultural and multilingual aspect through literature, and these exhibitions are widely used. Literature for children is an absolute priority at the Multilingual Library.

According to NAFO, the Norwegian national center for multilingual education, a good mother language is the fundament for learning a second language. Therefore we do our best to provide children literature even in the smallest book collections so that anyone can learn and be taught their mother language. At the Multilingual Library we have also developed, with the cooperation of a British publisher, Mantra Lingua, bilingual children books with parallel texts in Norwegian and a foreign language. These books are very much in use, especially when we finalized a Talking Pen compatible with the books and that pronounces and reads the books both in Norwegian and the other language. The international mother language day, as stated by UNESCO, falls on the 21st of February each year, and is marked with a nationwide celebration called "Morsmålsdagen" where libraries, schools, kindergartens and public libraries participate, through having events and exhibitions promoting the different languages spoken in that particular kindergarten, school or area. The Multilingual library participated in developing a trademarked logo with effects as balloons, pin buttons and reflectors with the "Morsmålsdagen" logo on it to state the fact that it is a celebration. Luckily for Norway we are still just 5 million inhabitants, with a relatively good economy which makes it possible to create hubs like The Multilingual library.

Finally a very interesting reflection Sweden came with, after the regional library in Stockholm made a report on the refugees' usage of the public libraries. Parts of the conclusions were that the public libraries were considered as true sanctuaries for the newcomers, as they got the help, the acceptance, the peace and quiet they needed in that specific period of their lives. Interestingly enough, due to a different usage of the library by the Swedes and the newcomers, the library didn't necessarily feel like the meeting place it is intended to be. Therefore they stressed the importance of activities that would gather both types of library users on a common ground.

For the Multilingual Library, this is our main goal. In addition to providing literature in the 64 biggest immigrant languages in Norway, we aim at having these books in Arabic, Amharic, Tigrinya equated with the Norwegian ones to create a common ground. We believe that being able to find rest in literature in your native language will definitely encourage, embellish and empower the road in becoming “one of us”.

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Mantra Lingua

www.mantralingua.com

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<http://nafo.hioa.no/>

Morsmålsdagen

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