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THE BLOG

A Remote Nordic School Made Me Realise It's Wrong To Segregate Our Children By Faith And Privilege

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The UWC Red Cross (RCN) school in Norway is remote. From Bergen, it's a two hour boat ride to Rysjedalsvika kai. Then, it's a 40 minute stomach-churning bus journey along winding mountain roads. And after that, it's a 10 minute cab journey from the solitary bus stop.

Some of the 200-odd students at the school recognise they live in a bit of a bubble. The word idyllic doesn't even begin to cover the sixth form college. Classes are taken in bright Nordic wooden buildings; teachers are known by their first names; kayaking, climbing and skiing in the winter are just some of the extra-curricular activities on offer.

But as much as it might sound like an exclusive private school, the students, who hail from 95 nations, are there on scholarships. A third come from Nordic countries, a third from other wealthy states - Britain, Italy, Spain, America. Two students a year are admitted on the Survivors of Conflict programme; funded by the Red Cross, it is for teens with disabilities who are from conflict or post-conflict countries. The remaining students are from developing nations: Liberia, Colombia, Cambodia, Iraq, Iran - the list goes on.

It is, as rector Richard ‘Larry’ Lamont describes it, a “hotpot” of nationalities - and it’s not without its challenges.

“The kantina is a good example of the different expectations students have from the college. For those who are middle class, or who come from the Nordic and Western Europe countries, they’re used to a high standard of living. And so they might find the food a little wanting. For others, just having drinking water on tap is a luxury - they don’t have to walk miles to fetch it. They get three hot meals a day, they don’t have to worry about where their next meal is coming from.”

The students sleep five to a room, and there is always a range of cultures.

“Sometimes we have to explain to female students that having a boy in their room would make their roommate, who might be from Western Sahara, uncomfortable,” Larry continues. “Or when we have the school disco, explain to the boys that, as lighthearted as they may intend it to be, whipping their shirt off on the dance floor is not appropriate behaviour when there are students from more conservative countries there. These students don’t go to that disco expecting that.”

RCN may seem as if it is a paradigm for liberal “safe space” advocates, but the school heartily encourages debate.

“We put Palestinian and Israeli students in the same room - why wouldn’t we?,” Larry exclaims. “Why wouldn’t we want to get them conversing? Yes, they have different political views but they get to start a dialogue with each other.”

It’s something perhaps even Britain’s most prestigious of universities could learn from. Safe spaces are all well and good, but not if they stifle discussion. No solution was ever reached without discussion and debate.

“I do feel when I’m older I’ll be able to understand other people’s point of view more,” one Palestinian student tells me. “When I am in my job, I will be able to more respectful, and I won’t judge so much. I think a lot of people have pre-conceived views of others, based on where they’re from.”

The school, which is part of the United World Colleges chain, has also made it a priority to recruit students with disabilities.

As one Nordic student at the school put it: “I’d never met someone who used a wheelchair before I came here.”

Almost every place in the school is wheelchair accessible, and those with disabilities are encouraged to be independent, and participate in every activity going.

“We want them to go home and become good role models and show their communities that they can do anything,” Hilde Genberg, head of the Survivors of Conflict Programme says.

The programme gives students with life-changing injuries the chance to receive physical rehabilitation and mental support at the neighbouring Haugland Rehabilitation Centre, as well as to learn English and, hopefully, pass the IB exams and head on to university. Many of the children have missed several years of education due to their injuries. One Cambodian student lost a leg when she stepped on a landmine, another from Liberia part of his arm. But they participate in everyday school life.

I sit in on one of the English foundation classes, where a student from Cambodia, another from Argentina and a third from Western Sahara are learning the names of body parts.

The teacher introduces a game of ‘Simon Says’ to help the group learn. Omar, from Western Sahara, leads the game and is delighted when he catches everyone out, including the teacher, on the first round. There’s an eruption of giggling when he says ‘touch your foot’ and Kik, who is from Cambodia and uses a wheelchair, exclaims “But I haven’t got a foot!”

“We teach them to ski,” says Arne Osland, director of development. “And some of them pick it up immediately, even if they’ve never seen snow before. You forget they’re wearing prosthetic legs [provided by the Nordic government]. I’ve learnt a lot about resilience and courage from these students.”

A far cry from my ancient English school with its narrow corridors and winding staircases, where having a student with a disability was not only unheard of, but unfathomable.

The school doesn’t shy away from conflicting cultures either: rooming Palestinians with Israelis, Moroccans with Western Saharawis, Iraqis with Americans. It’s all part and parcel of growing up with diversity. And our British schools could learn a lot from it.

I attended a Catholic grammar school. So not only was it religiously selective, there was little diversity in the way of culture, ethnicity or socio-economic background. This meant the majority of us had to wait until we got to

university or work before we had the opportunity to meet people from different walks of life. It's a dangerous system; those at private schools mingle with fellow wealthy students, those at religious schools only move in friendship groups of the same faith. What does that mean for adulthood?

In today's social landscape, where we are witnessing the re-emergence of alt-right groups, the seemingly never-ending rise of extremist groups, and an increasingly-out of touch governments introducing misplaced anti-terror schemes, surely it's never been more important to have diversity in our schools, to ensure our future leaders are open-minded and well-informed.

I sit it on a class taught by Daniel, a Ghanian world development teacher. Today's lesson is on urbanisation. As the only Brit in the class, I'm immediately roped in to provide examples of gentrification in London, of which I can give many. Pupils chime in with instances from their own countries, and the lesson becomes a conversation, rather than a one-way lecture from teacher to student. I remember back to my own sixth form classes, and recall them to be rather different; pupils snoozing at the back, packing up 10 minutes before the end of the lesson, teachers reading from text books.

I’m not saying every school should try to emulate RCN - for a start it teaches the International Baccalaureate, and it has the advantage of being in Norway, known for its educational excellence - but there are certainly lessons to be learned.

Faith schools and private schools may be able to boast of academic achievements, or top-class facilities, but what example does segregating by faith or privilege set to our children? And what impact does that have on the decisions and policies of our future leaders?

The school may feel rather utopian, but surely it's no bad thing to for future leaders to test out debate and conflict resolution - whether it's over whose turn it is to wash up or debating Morocco's claim over Western Sahara.

I ask a table of students at breakfast what they do and don't like about the school. The majority consensus is "everything". One girl from China waxes lyrical about the proximity to nature: "I think it's really important people are close to nature. The mountains make me think about who I am."

My next question about what they don't like prompts a lot of umming and aahing. I probe them: Come on, there must be something.

I find it unsettling the students are so content with their education.

"I don't like that the school doesn't recycle properly," one Nordic girl finally answers. Another adds: "I don't like that the lights aren't always switched off when they're not needed."

Both fair points, and it's almost a relief the school isn't totally perfect. But if those are the only grumbles, then they must be doing something right.

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