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'Not integrated at all. Whatsoever': teachers' narratives on the integration of newly arrived refugee students in Norway

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how teachers working with newly arrived adolescent refugee students reflect on these students, their situation within the educational system and in Norwegian society. We research the ways in which these reflections engage with the various understandings of the ubiquitous and 'fuzzy' notion of immigrant integration, a concept which we approach critically. The empirical data consists of interviews with teachers in three Adult Education establishments in Norway. Our aim was to identify the narratives of integration the teachers draw on and (re)produce, and to discuss these in relation to policies and perceptions of integration in Norwegian schools and society. Our analysis identified three narratives of integration, namely (1) Integration as having social relations with 'Norwegians', (2) Integration as acquiring knowledge and (3) Integration as endorsing 'Norwegian' values. These narratives exist alongside a corresponding image of the newly arrived migrant students as socially unintegrated and as educationally and culturally deficient. The article's main argument is that the teachers' narratives, despite their complex and multifaceted character, are embedded in an educational and societal context where the longstanding Norwegian ideal of cultural sameness leads to added pressure on immigrants to assimilate.

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Introduction

Although European educational systems have long histories of serving immigrant and language-minority students, the unexpected timing and size of more recent immigration movements have emphasised existing shortfalls in systems and competencies (Sugarman 2015). In Norway, immigrants and Norwegian-born to immigrant parents account for 18% of the total population (Statistics Norway 2020). Of these, approximately one in five are born in Norway with foreign-born parents, whereas the rest are foreign-born (Statistics Norway 2020). In the wake of the refugee situation in 2015, Norway saw a large increase in the number of newly arrived refugees.¹ In 2015, 31,000 refugees

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applied for asylum in Norway, 5500 of whom were unaccompanied asylum-seeking adolescents (Dalgard 2017). This unprecedented growth in the numbers brought with it both possibilities and challenges. This is particularly the case for the Adult Education establishments (schools), where the students are predominantly newly arrived migrant students, including adolescents above compulsory school age (16), who do not have a school diploma from their countries of origin or transit.

As in many other countries, in Norway school is perceived as one of the most important arenas for immigrant integration (Hilt 2016, 2020; Jortveit 2017; Pastoor 2020; Nilsson 2017; Taylor and Sidhu 2012). School is seen as crucial both in terms of students' qualification for further education and employment, and in terms of their social integration (Pastoor 2020; Dunlavy et al. 2020). This was made explicit in a Norwegian Government report entitled *Integration and Trust: Long-term Consequences of High Immigration*, which states that 'school has a key role in securing knowledge that facilitates participation in society and learning, and in providing normative socialisation in the interests of strengthening mutual trust and belonging' (NOU 2017, 21, our translation). Similarly, the appointment of the first Norwegian Minister of Integration and Education in 2018 sent a strong signal about education being fundamental to immigrant integration. For teachers working with newly arrived students, this strong interconnect-edness between education and integration means that their task is not merely to teach skills but also values and attitudes (Hilt 2020).

Despite the widespread consensus of school being the – or one of the – most important arenas for integration, there are relatively few studies exploring teachers' perceptions of integration in Norway. The main body of research on integration in schools consists of document studies (e.g. Jortveit 2017; Hilt 2016), ethnographic studies (e.g. Chingaramirez 2017; Solbue 2014) and student interview studies (e.g. Solberg 2014; Strzemecka 2015; Solbue, Helleve, and Smith 2017; Hilt 2020; Kjelaas *forthcoming*). This study aims to contribute to redressing this lack by providing insight into how teachers in Adult Education understand the notion of integration. More specifically we ask: How do teachers of newly arrived adolescent migrants experience working with this group of students? How do they perceive their students' general situation and future prospects within the Norwegian educational system and wider society? What narratives of immigrant integration do these experiences and perceptions draw on and (re)produce?

The Norwegian educational context: the principle of the unitary school

In Norway, many adolescent migrant students who do not have a school diploma from their countries of origin or transit, are hosted in Adult Education establishments run by the local municipality.² This study was conducted in three such Adult Education establishments. These schools provide either compensatory basic education (primary and lower secondary), Norwegian language training and social studies, or both, in three different groups based on immigrant status. These are refugees between 18 and 55 years with residence permits who need basic qualifications, foreign nationals from 16 to 67 with permanent residency who participate in language and social studies for up to 600 hours, and immigrants over 16 years who do not have a primary and lower secondary diploma or equivalent from their countries of origin or transit, and who are entitled to condensed primary education for up to four years (The Norwegian Directorate of

Integration and Diversity 2021a, 2021b; The Norwegian Education Act § 4A-1). The Adult Education establishments participating in this study hosted students from all three of these groups, but the majority were refugees who needed basic qualifications.

Although Norwegians who have not completed primary and lower secondary education can also enrol in adult education establishments, this is rare today.³ As a result, most Adult Education establishments function as segregated, all-migrant schools. This makes them unique and also subject to controversy in the Norwegian educational context (Hilt 2017). The Norwegian school system is regulated by the ‘principle of the unitary school’, meaning that all students, whatever their capabilities or heritage, are expected to attend the same schools. This egalitarian policy is anchored in a broad political consensus based on the belief that equal opportunities, free public education and inclusion for all will advance social cohesion and integration (Volckmar 2016). The segregated system for newly arrived migrant adolescent students is thus controversial, being an exception to the rule.⁴ This system is also paradoxical since integration is the main goal of these segregated schools. This paradox means that Adult Education establishments are an important context in which to explore the complex and multifaceted notion of immigrant integration and the ways in which it is understood and negotiated in contemporary Norway.

Immigrant integration and the key role of the Adult Education establishment

Even though integration is today generally seen as *the* way to deal with immigration in Norway and in other Western countries (Hagelund 2003; Hadj Abdou 2019), the concept of immigrant integration has been described as both ‘fuzzy’ (Grillo 2007), ‘exceptionally unclear’ (Rytter 2019) and ‘neocolonial’ (Schinkel 2018). Integration has shifted from being an important *etic* concept in social theory to more of an *emic* concept employed by politicians, media and the general public ‘to address specific minorities and their more or less unsatisfactory ways of being and belonging in particular nation-states’ (Rytter 2019, 679). According to Rytter (2019), this extended use of the concept means that it has lost its analytical significance, while inflating its political and moral dimensions. While the concept of immigrant integration is often thought of as descriptive, as Schinkel (2018) has pointed out, it is in fact normative. An important dimension of this normativity is the ever-present mechanism of boundary making as integration becomes a ‘governmentality of difference’ (Anthias 2013). Such boundary making finds expression not least, as Masoud et al. put it, in ‘the hidden realities of exclusionary inclusion practices in integration training’ (2021, 53).

When discussing the policies of immigration in the Norwegian context, we refer to integration as the idea/practice of adopting majority culture while maintaining some of one’s original culture, assimilation as the idea that minorities can or should be like the majority, and segregation as minority groups wanting or being allowed to live in separate communities (Hagelund and Loga 2009). There have been several shifts in the understanding of immigrant integration in Norwegian government policy (Sætermo, Gullikstad, and Korsnes 2021). In the 1970s, when immigration was a rather new phenomenon in Norway, integration, assimilation and segregation were treated as equally acceptable alternatives. In the 1980s, government policy started to actively encourage migrants to preserve their cultural, linguistic and religious identities,

while making some sorts of adaptations to Norwegian society (Hagelund 2003). By the end of the 1990s, new policies aimed at putting limits on immigrants' cultural and religious practices were established, partly as a result of several incidents of honor-related violence which received considerable media attention. Following this, ideas of cultural preservation and diversity started to lose currency, particularly when it came to 'Norwegian' values related to democracy and gender equality. Added to this, a work inducement programme was launched which placed a strong emphasis on encouraging immigrants to enter the labour force (Brochmann and Djuve 2013). This emphasis on work still stands, the 2021 integration law introducing individual integration plans based on 'competence mapping', career guidance and individual integration contracts (Kjelaas forthcoming).⁵

Because of the current emphasis on immigrants' labour market participation, education is perceived as fundamental for integration. In Norwegian policy, integration has become synonymous with gaining qualifications, as a recent government report made explicit: 'it is necessary to place a greater emphasis on education and qualification as part of a long-term integration strategy' (NOU 2017, 15). This focus on education is even more pronounced when it comes to adolescent and adult refugee students, who have a relatively short time to qualify for further education and work, and who tend to have little formal education due to conflict, flight and transit. Such students are described as lacking the skills 'sought after' by the Norwegian labour market (NOU 2017, 15). As a result, they are perceived as particularly vulnerable and as desperately needing formal qualifications. Altogether these conditions create an educational case which, we would argue, casts a magnifying light on dominant understandings of integration in Norwegian policy and society.

In Norway, as elsewhere in Europe, increasing immigration has led to a heightened awareness of issues related to social fragmentation and national values. Such concerns are often formulated in terms of fears that immigrants do not share or accept 'Norwegian' values. As a result, the concept of immigrant integration has come equated with acquiring 'Norwegian' values, even though no one really seems to be able to say what these values are or are not. Nevertheless, or may be also because of this lack of clarity, integration seems to be conflated with notions of sameness, in the sense that social and cultural differences are seen as problematic (Sætermo, Gullikstad, and Korsnes 2021). Gullestad describes the emphasis on cultural sameness in the Norwegian context as creating 'an invisible fence for the acceptance of 'immigrants' as unmarked citizens who 'belong' in Norway' (2002, 59). Another way to put it is that migrants are expected to assimilate in order to fit into Norwegian society. Studies of integration in and through education in the Norwegian and Nordic context support these findings, suggesting that 'assimilationist and acculturation perspectives continue to be persistent and pervasive' (Lundberg 2020, p. 2). In the educational context, the mechanics of assimilation are doubly relevant since schools are not only seen as gateways to working life, but also as sites where common values and identities are formed (Hilt 2020).

Studies of teachers' perspectives on migrant integration in schools in Denmark, Switzerland and Sweden have drawn attention to similar mechanics of assimilation, and to the ways in which these reproduce the discursive positionings of migrants in national integration policies. These studies demonstrate that the teachers' integration work and expressions of care for their students are paradoxically imbricated in disciplinary practices that lead to their othering (Jaffe-Walter 2017). In the Danish context, Jaffe-

Walter coins the term ‘coercive concern’ to describe the ways in which the teachers ‘cloaked processes of racialization and coercive assimilation in liberal discourses of care and concern’ (Jaffe-Walter 2019, sec. 5, para. 4). Similarly, a Swiss study points to the ambiguity of the teachers’ apparent benevolence towards their students, which often shifted into ‘a more demanding, accusatory tone’ (Lems 2020, sec.2, para. 4). These teachers reprimanded their students for not making efforts to become integrated, while refusing to acknowledge that the stigma attached to their segregated classes made it impossible for them to get to know their Swiss peers. Lems also points out that the teachers disregarded the diversity in their students’ backgrounds, seeing them as a homogenised and problematic group which was generally deficient, educationally and culturally lacking and emotionally flawed (2020). In a similar vein, research on newly arrived adolescent students in Sweden and Norway shows that students are often considered as a homogenous group characterised as deficient, despite their starkly different backgrounds (Skowronski 2013; Sharif 2017; Wigg and Ehrlin 2021). Moreover, their previous experiences, skills and knowledge are not usually acknowledged in the school context (Aho 2018; Kjelaas et al. 2020; Kjelaas 2022). In the Swedish context, Brännström (2021) finds that students with little previous formal education are ‘particularly at risk of being positioned within racialised or psychological discourses’ (15). Brännström describes how ‘students in the Language Introduction Programs are both positioned as individuals with rights and as deficient and lacking in what is here termed here as ‘Swedishness’ (2021, 82-83).

Other studies discuss integration in relation to the mechanisms of neoliberalism and liberal democratic schooling systems structured on individualism. These point to the ways in which the value placed on independence and the disregard for collectivism, family ties and interdependence not only disadvantages migrant students who espouse these values but means that they are more likely to be viewed as ‘resisting social integration and upward social mobility’ (Lundberg 2020; Hilt 2016; Hilt 2017).

Another strand of research focuses on teachers’ positive personal investment in their refugee students, highlighting ‘pedagogical practices that foster a nurturing classroom environment and help students to build a sense of belonging’ (Kaukko Mervi and Kohli 2021, 731; Kristensen, Ringrose, and Kjelaas 2019; Pastoor 2020). Kaukko, Wilkinson, and Kohli’s study undertaken in two national contexts (Finland and Australia) describes teachers’ practices in terms of ‘pedagogical love’ understood in terms of the ways in which teachers went beyond their ‘professional duty of care’ by ‘opening their minds and hearts to the students’ lived conditions, engaging with their histories, and constantly shaping their pedagogy accordingly’ (2021, 731).

Method and data

The empirical scope of this paper comprises qualitative interviews with twelve teachers working at three Adult Education establishments. One was situated in a city and had a separate building for adolescent students. The other two were in rural areas and had students of all ages in the same building. The city-based establishment had approximately five times more students and teachers than the two other schools. The interviewees were either directly recruited by the researchers or indirectly by contact persons in the school management, who in these cases acted as mediators. Some of the interviewees

were formally qualified teachers who had previously worked in primary, lower or upper secondary schools, whereas others had some relevant education or experience related to multicultural or second language teaching but were not formally qualified as teachers. The interviewees' background reflects the general situation in Adult Education establishments in Norway. Until January 2021 an exception to the Education Act allowed teachers with no formal pedagogical qualifications to work in Adult Education (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2015).

To make room for a variety of potentially conflicting perceptions and meanings, we decided to group the interviewees into pairs (three interviews) or groups of three (three interviews). The aim of the interviews was (1) to get a feel for the teachers' experiences with working with this particular group of students, (2) to gain insights into their impressions of the students' general situation both within and outside school, (3) to explore any opportunities and challenges they might bring up in relation to their students' integration in school and society and (4) to draw on these experiences, insights and explorations in order to identify the narratives of integration they re-/produce.

A semi-structured interview guide was used when interviewing all the pairs/groups of teachers. We were interested in identifying the understandings of integration which underpinned these experiences and impressions. In line with focus group interview principles, the interviewees were encouraged to share both general reflections and specific experiences related to their students' integration, as well as to comment, support, elaborate on or challenge each other's', whereas we as moderators facilitated the conversation (Vaughn, Schumm, and Sinagub 1996). All the interviews were conducted at the schools where the teachers were working during working hours. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour and was organised rather flexibly with a list of questions prepared by the interviewer. The interviews were conducted in Norwegian and transcribed verbatim. The translation into English was done by the first author who is a native English speaker.

When analysing the transcripts, we have taken inspiration from narrative analysis. This means that our focus of attention was the stories the teachers produced in the interviews, that is the ways in which they make sense of the situations and worlds they are describing, more than the situations and worlds in themselves. Even though narrative analysis includes a lot of different perspectives and practices, these are all based on the idea that humans make sense of themselves and their surroundings through telling stories (Riessman 2008). Narratives are thus by default interpretive, in the sense that there is no 'true' narrative that puts 'reality' into words. Narratives rather 'impose a certain order and meaning to events' and, as narrators make decisions about 'events, ordering, punctuation, values, and emphasis', a particular reality is constructed (Kartch 2017). Another important feature of narrative analysis is that the production of stories is seen as a collective activity, both in the sense that all conversations can be described as a co-production of stories, and in the sense that the 'smaller' stories that are produced either individually or in smaller groups are also part of 'big' stories that societies and cultures share (Bo, Christensen, and Thomsen 2016). These 'big', collective narratives limit people's narrative maneuvering space in terms of circumscribing what they think of themselves and others (Staunæs 2004, 56). While individuals are not simply in the thrall of these collective narratives, they are nevertheless influenced by them and can to a certain extent simultaneously draw on a variety of collective narratives.

Narrative research thus provides information about both individual meaning making and the wider social context in which this meaning making takes place.

In this article, we are interested in examining the meaning making the teachers engage in when sharing their reflections and experiences with this specific group of students, and the underlying assumptions about integration these reflections brought to play. In line with the idea of narrative co-production, we include in our analytical sections longer quotations from the data which cover both the interviewer's questions and the participants' responses, making the mechanics of co-production more visible. At other moments we draw on shorter excerpts from the teachers' stories which illustrate or provide insights into the overarching narratives. When analysing the data, we identified three overarching narratives: (1) Integration as social relations with 'Norwegians'⁶: the friendless student, (2) Integration as acquiring knowledge: the ignorant student, (3) Integration as endorsement of 'Norwegian' values: the culturally different student.

All the informants came across as dedicated to their jobs and exceptionally caring and committed to their students. We found many examples of narratives of teachers going beyond the call of duty when it came to helping individual students who needed additional support and going beyond their role as teacher, crossing over into a 'mothering role' (Kristensen, Ringrose, and Kjelaas 2019). We note that while the narratives we identified from the interviews suggest that the teachers subscribe to the 'deficiency model' identified in other Scandinavian contexts, these narratives should be read within the context of teachers' strong personal commitment to their students and their work, as described in the other research on teachers working with refugee students (Kaukko et al. 2021).

Analysis

The narrative of integration as social relations with 'Norwegians': the friendless student

When analysing the teachers' reflections about their students' integration, the most striking narrative we find is that of the students' near total segregation from Norwegian society. This narrative is often expressed in statements such as the one in the title of this article: 'Not integrated at all. Whatsoever'. Even though these statements are formulated in very general terms, the teachers apply them in ways that imply that they refer to the vast majority of the newly arrived students. This suggests that there are few exceptions to the general situation of students' social isolation from what and who in this particular context is seen as relevant and meaningful. When reviewing these statements about *the unintegrated student*, we see that the notion of integration that comes to the fore is very much that of having some kind of personal rather than professional or institutional relationship to Norwegians. These relationships would typically be friendships, such as a close contact with a Norwegian peer, but they could also be more intimate, that is to say relations with girlfriends/boyfriends, or more superficial, meaning having some kind of contact with Norwegians outside of school. Integration in this sense could for example include being a member of an 'ordinary' football club, that is to say not one organised specifically for people with migrant background. All in all, there are many examples in our interview material where the teachers explicitly address the students'

non-existing relations with ‘ordinary Norwegians’. For example, this one, which came quite early on in an interview with a group of teachers of adolescent students in a segregated school:

Mm. They obviously don’t have many Norwegian friends. No ... they don’t.

This statement is typical of the way in which the teachers often discuss their students’ lack of contact with ‘Norwegians’ as a matter of fact, as if they take it as a given that they are socially isolated. Another teacher reiterates the same point about the students’ friendlessness, describing it in terms of one of the many major problems that they have to deal with:

One of the challenges they face is having so little contact with Norwegians and ending up just staying at home.

The reference to the students ‘just’ being at home again seems to reinforce the idea that they lack opportunities to take part in everyday social activities and live their lives apart from mainstream society.

Even more telling, though, are the quotes describing the exceptions from this widespread isolation:

Interviewer: How integrated would you say that your students are?

Teacher: In Norwegian society?

Interviewer: Yes?

Teacher: Out of the twelve [students] I currently have I would say that two of them are a bit integrated. One of them is actually quite integrated, I suppose (...) And the other is getting there. The second one spends a lot of time in a group [of students] from his own culture. Some of them are more religious now than they were back home.

Integration here is understood as having some kind of relationship with Norwegian peers, a situation which is contrasted with spending time with people from your own culture. Moreover, it seems to equate with some sort of individualised achievement – where migrant students are placed on a sliding integration scale of being fully, partly or not at all integrated.

Integration measures organised by the schools for adolescent migrants would, according to the teachers we interviewed, typically involve arranging meetings where the newly arrived migrant students would meet with Norwegians, and preferably, with students their own age from mainstream Norwegian schools. These situations represent teachers’ attempts to help their students to come out of the segregated environment of the school, and to meet other students in a non-threatening environment, although the teachers mention that some students find these encounters rather nerve-wracking. Describing one such joint initiative, one teacher recounts how many of her students had been looking forward to this first encounter with Norwegians their age, and that they had high expectations of making new friends, only to be met by disappointment:

Then they were going to have home economics. And you know, they know how to cook. And they do that at home. So, for some of them it was really fun, and at first, they had a lot of expectations about like “Oh now we’re going to a Norwegian school, we will be integrated with Norwegian kids”. But that didn’t happen.

The teachers regard these ‘mixing occasions’ as challenging not only for their own students but also for the ‘Norwegian’ students involved, who are described as having difficulty making connections with the ‘new’ students. The teachers interpreted the problem as resulting from their students’ lack of Norwegian language competencies:

It’s difficult for Norwegian students, who have enough trouble of their own getting a conversation going with someone with poor language skills. It’s hard enough for us, and we’re pretty much professionals.

When the teachers discuss the problematic aspects of real and potential meetings between their students and young Norwegians, they not only point to language issues, but also to the fact that they believe that the two groups have nothing in common:

What in the world are they going to talk to a Norwegian 17-year-old about!? Well you need to find some sort of common interest, like sports or music and not many of our students are interested in music, a few of them have a music a background, but not many.

Such statements suggest that the teachers generally consider the newly arrived migrant students to be rather different from their Norwegian peers. They seem to view these differences as hard to overcome, and by implication, appear to regard that the communication between the two groups as very challenging.

At the same time the teachers also seem to imply that it is ‘only natural’ that Norwegian students disengage from ‘challenging’ encounters with their students. In this sense, the teachers do not see Norwegian students as having or sharing equal responsibility in the labour of integration. They appear to excuse Norwegian students from this ‘work’ on the basis that it is not realistic to expect Norwegian teenagers to make ‘huge’ efforts to communicate across cultural differences and language barriers. However, the teachers do not excuse their own students from this integration work, even though this task is described as challenging for them too, since they have no choice but to keep working on the ‘impossible task’, of communicating with ‘disinterested’ Norwegian peers.

The narrative of integration as acquiring knowledge: the ignorant student

Another narrative about integration that comes to the fore when analysing the teachers’ reflections about their students is that of integration as being conditional on acquiring knowledge. This way of talking about integration is closely connected to the social relations we have just described, in the sense that knowledge, or lack of the kind of knowledge needed for establishing social relations with Norwegians is seen both as a means and an end. According to the teachers, the students are marginalised from society *because* they lack certain knowledge and they lack knowledge *because* they are isolated from society. The topics the teachers dwell on most when talking about integration in terms of acquiring knowledge are Norwegian language skills, school knowledge and general knowledge about Norwegian society, as well as popular culture etc.

Within this narrative, language was often discussed as very important to integration, and to exemplify this view we will share a conversation one of the teachers had with her students immediately before our interview. The conversation took place in a math class, but ‘drifted away’, as the teacher put it, onto the topic of language.

At the end of the class we were talking about integration and language, and the fact that if you don't know the language everything becomes difficult. Communication gets difficult. And I said to [to the students] that on the Norwegian national day there were several women from Syria who were helping out with a public arrangement, and people [Norwegians] wanted to talk to them. Because they [the Norwegians] were not comfortable with the situation where the Norwegian women were standing in one place and the Syrian women were standing by themselves. But, as you know, it is hard to communicate when they [Syrian women] are only able to reply with one and a half words or so. So, to know the language is so important for being able to take part in a simple conversation (...).

These teachers understand language as a window into many dimensions of life in Norway: to relations with Norwegian people, to social networks, to knowledge about Norwegian society, and not least to work. Another teacher, clearly somehow frustrated, expressed it like this:

They need to learn everything.

Expressing a similar statement but in a bit more elaborated form, another teacher declared:

They are lacking the basic things which Norwegian adolescents learned when they were very, very young.

In a similar vein, the teachers discuss their students' perceived gaps in general knowledge as a barrier to integration. One teacher emphasises this when discussing the challenge she faces in bridging the gap between her students' knowledge base and the knowledge they will be expected to have when they transfer to mainstream school. She points to their lack of general knowledge about time, space, the universe and the origins of man, emphasising the scepticism she encounters when trying to teach these types of topics:

This point about the educational level that my colleague mentioned is a very important point. Last year we had, at the end of the primary school curriculum, we introduced teaching on evolution. One of the most intelligent boys sat with his arms crossed and was like, 'Really teacher, you believe that, you believe people came from monkeys? Hmm. Really?' And this year we got to the secondary school curriculum and you're supposed to talk about the globe and stuff. The same boy was like, 'Teacher, are you sure the world is round, teacher, and that it's not flat?' So there's a lot to teach. And when as well as that I tell them that we've been to the moon, they think I'm lying. So, there are clearly some big gaps when it comes to their level of knowledge.

While the teacher constructs the students as educationally deficient, she also nuances her comments by making clear, at least in the case of the first student mentioned, 'one of the most intelligent boys', that it not his intellectual abilities that are at stake. Despite such nuances, the teachers generally appear to think that there is such a vast amount of knowledge that the students lack, which 'Norwegians' take for granted, and which makes it difficult for them to integrate. They point to the way that they as teachers handle these perceived gaps, but at the same time they seem to be saying that filling these gaps is an extremely difficult task, especially when some students do not even see the value in gaining such knowledge and are skeptical about its very factuality.

The narrative of integration as the endorsement of modern value: the culturally different student

The third narrative in our material relates to the teachers' perception of their students as different from 'Norwegians' in general and their 'Norwegian' peers in particular. We have found this narrative in all the interviews, sometimes very explicitly stated in direct language with the use of contrasts and correlations, but more often implicitly communicated when teachers discuss what characterises this particular group of students. The teachers appear to think that there are so many experiences and values which these students do not have, know or share which somehow makes it difficult for them to become part of Norwegian society. In this sense the teachers understand integration in cultural terms as the endorsement of typically 'Norwegian' values whether related to relationship practices, dress codes or everyday behaviours. And as we will see, the cultural differences which the teachers point to which they believe set their students apart from their Norwegian peers are very much related to the experiences these students have *not* had – as they have been born and brought up in countries very different from Norway.

This kind of focus on cultural lack would for example often be voiced by teachers when describing a particular student's background, as this teacher did when explicitly commenting on a particular difference which she thinks is very prominent in some of her young students:

Many come from rural societies with a farming culture which we can understand if we compare it to a hundred and fifty years ago here. Getting to work, rolling up your sleeves, that was what was needed. Here in Norway, you need to have a certain educational background even to be able to open up letters, read bills, get a job. Some of our students struggle to understand this.

By contrasting the students' childhood experiences with circumstances we could find in Norway over a century ago, the teacher is drawing a picture of the students as not only different, but also as clearly backward in terms of knowledge, experiences, and competences.

In this narrative, as in the first narrative, the teachers also discuss their students' 'integration status' in individualised terms, labelling them as more or less culturally assimilated depending on their family background:

Interviewer: What does it mean that a person is very integrated while another person is not that integrated? What is different about them?

Teacher: They have grown up in modern families in their homeland. They are very up and coming boys, they're curious, and they like girls.

The students who are considered most integrated are those who adopt Western relationship norms. They are described positively as 'enterprising and inquisitive'. Here the teachers apply 'modernity' as the yardstick for integration. The 'modern behaviour' described above is understood to be learnt not from their families. This suggests that the teachers understand 'modern' values both as something that some students need to be taught at school but also as something that students with more liberal families learn at home.

When it comes to teaching values at school, the teachers communicate that this is sometimes a lost cause. This is illustrated when the teachers discuss what they perceive

as their students' problematic attitudes to the veil. One teacher describes how the topic is debated in class, focusing on an encounter with a male student who resists her arguments against the wearing of the veil:

Because it was very ingrained this idea that 'when I get married, my wife will wear a hijab because'. Well, we try to talk about what culture is, what religion is, what kind of decisions and we use examples from Norway, that Norway has been a Christian country. The Bible talks about wearing it but we don't do that. 'No, because if a woman doesn't wear a hijab she could be raped'. So that's the only time I really didn't get anywhere with this. They are very insistent that it should be like that, that it's a good head covering, it's the way it should be. [...] Nobody has become angry, they haven't communicated that, there haven't been strong opinions, that's just the way it is for them. But you decide for yourself. But, yeah.

The teacher describes how she tries to persuade the student to change his attitude, implying that like Norwegians, he should abandon outdated religious traditions and that, as long as he does not, integration will be difficult.

The example of discussing the veil reinforces the emphasis teachers place on teaching 'Norwegian' values related to gender relations and gender equality to their students. This is a topic which the teachers explicitly discuss as important, underlining that it is a value that students 'need' to learn:

- Teacher 1: Drop by drop. Yes, what they need. We try to give them roughly the equivalent of what we have in a normal school, so we give, we put a bit more focus, when there are events and things that are important in Norwegian culture.
- Teacher 2: Mm. Equality, respect for the other gender.
- Teacher 1: Absolutely.
- Teacher 2: That's important.
- Teacher 1: Values, I mean these are not Norwegian values, they are Western values.

The assumption here is that students should unlearn their values and assimilate to standard liberal 'Norwegian' values.

The teachers are also keen to point out that they need to teach their students everyday 'Norwegian' behavioural norms, such as precise timekeeping. This teacher explains how she used a variety of different arguments to convince her students of the importance of this cultural norm:

Yes, there has been a bit of "when we start at nine, it means we start at nine, and not at a quarter past nine". This has been a bit of a theme in the groups every autumn. So, yes, I explained that in Norway, if you don't get to work on time, you might risk losing your job. So that's one thing we have talked about, that kind of cultural integration. My husband doesn't get to work late. I don't get to work late. It's cold, it's cold for me too.

In the narrative of integration as the endorsement of 'Norwegian' values, the teachers either implicitly or, as here, explicitly discuss integration in cultural terms, and in such a way that implies that their students' 'different' and traditional values are a barrier to integration. Integration in this narrative equates to cultural assimilation, the assumption being that teaching 'Norwegian' values is a difficult task but one which the teachers believe to be essential for the students' prospects in Norwegian society.

Concluding discussion

In this article we have examined how teachers of newly arrived adolescent migrants perceive their students' present situation and future prospects within the Norwegian educational system and within wider society and identified the narratives of immigrant integration perceptions they draw on and (re)produce. Moreover, we have provided insights into how these integration narratives draw on and (re)produce certain understandings of the students and their present situation and future prospects within the Norwegian educational system and society. We have shown that these narratives are all embedded in an educational and societal context where sameness is considered a positive value, and which, by extension, favours the reproduction of assimilationist thinking. We note the importance of taking into account the wider collective narratives of assimilation when interpreting the teachers' narratives about their students and their integration. This means that while the assimilationist undercurrent of the narratives may come across as positioning the teachers as critical or negative, these narratives must be read within the educational system and wider social systems in which they are embedded, where such views are both commonplace and sanctioned.

In the first narrative integration is construed of in terms of social relations with Norwegians. The students are described as friendless and isolated from mainstream society, so as effectively unintegrated. Within this narrative, the teachers do not seem to be interested in the students' relations with friends or acquaintances from their home culture. Their main focus on relations with Norwegians builds on the general idea that 'sameness' is the ideal, achieved by adopting Norwegian interests, practices and values (Sætermo et al. 2020)]. While emphasising this ideal, the teachers do not question the students' everyday situation in a segregated school which makes any realistic prospects of them becoming 'the same as Norwegians' highly unlikely. In the second narrative, integration is understood as acquiring knowledge, especially the knowledge necessary to enter the Norwegian labour market. Education here is perceived not only as a goal in itself but also as a means to economic integration. Within this narrative, students are generally discussed as 'ignorant'. Here difference, in terms of not having the 'right' kind of knowledge, is highlighted as an explicit barrier to integration, whereas sameness is perceived as the key to integration. In the third narrative, teachers focus explicitly on the students' cultural difference, implying that they are somehow culturally backward and mismatched with 'Norwegian', 'modern' values, perceptions and practices. In this narrative, integration is again construed as achieved through sameness, whereas difference stands in the way.

Underlining all three narratives is the idea that integration is difficult, that most of the students are not easily integratable, whether socially, educationally, or culturally, and that it is individual students who have to change and work hard towards integration via sameness – a process that does not seem to involve the 'host society'. Lundberg builds on Schierup and Ålund's (2011) conceptualisation and describes this one-way process as a result of a form of 'illiberal liberalism' (Schierup and Ålund 2011) spawned by the neo-liberalist focus on individualism, which ascribes the responsibility for integration to migrants whose 'job' it is to 'culturally assimilate and to make themselves available to the labour market by way of education and acculturation' (Lundberg 2020, 3).

The teachers in our study describe their part in *teaching assimilation*, whether persuading their students to accept Norwegian values, communicating knowledge that they need for further education and jobs, or drilling in everyday norms. In other words, they are describing how they are trying to get the students to become ‘the same’ as Norwegians, to have similar behaviours, a similar knowledge base, and similar values. They describe the difficult task of turning their students into ‘Norwegians’ while paradoxically expressing doubts about whether they will ever reach the ultimate goal. Underlying their communications is the assumption that their students are a homogeneous problematic group with multidimensional deficiencies which represent serious barriers to assimilation.

As such the teachers’ thinking on integration draws on collective social and political narratives of integration in Norway which are conflated with notions of sameness and which problematise cultural differences. These conclusions echo other research which also draws attention to the normalisation of assimilation in schools with migrant students (e.g. Lems 2020; Lundberg 2020). However, the teachers in this study stand out in the ways in which they generally problematise cultural differences without singling out particular groups of immigrants, or religions, or on expressing hostility or recrimination towards their students. While we do not know what their methods are in practice, their descriptions suggest that these are more persuasive than coercive. As such their form of integration thinking represents a softer brand of ‘nationalisation’ or ‘Norwegianisation’. Finally, underlying these Norwegian teachers’ persuasive strategies we can read a *pragmatism* as regards integration, based on the idea that, in order to have *any* chance of succeeding in their future, of getting a job, of having a ‘happy life’ or of connecting to Norwegian society, their students need to become as Norwegian as possible as soon as possible, however (im)possible that may seem.

Notes

1. According to the UNHCR, forced displacement escalated sharply in 2015, leading to the highest level of refugees ever recorded up to then (UNHCR 2016). The context was the war in Syria (including the rise of ISIS), and instability in Afghanistan, and other Middle Eastern countries.
2. In more and more cases, adolescent migrant students above 16 years are enrolled in specifically targeted units in mainstream Upper Secondary schools, in so-called ‘combination classes’.
3. Nine out of ten participants in adult education are immigrants (Dæhlen et al. 2013).
4. Adult immigrants have only one educational option – to attend adult education, whereas there are two options for adolescent immigrants: attending adult education or mainstream upper secondary schools. However, the students themselves cannot choose – the municipality and/or county decide on which option to offer (Kjelaas forthcoming).
5. The plan covers information about the final educational level the participant should be aiming for, including their Norwegian level, the total number of hours and contents of their Norwegian and Social Studies courses, and their program’s duration and contents.
6. The quotation marks are used to signal that we are referring to the teachers’ use of the term ‘Norwegian’, and not the legally correct meaning. The teachers mainly use ‘Norwegian’ with reference to *ethnic* Norwegians, and/or *native speakers* of Norwegian, whereas the legal term refers to citizenship (and not ethnic or linguistic background). In subsequent references, we omit the use of inverted commas, on the understanding that we are referring to the teachers’ usage as described in this note.

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