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# Educational failure as a potential opening to real teaching – The case of teaching unaccompanied minors in Norway

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**ABSTRACT:** This article explores the complexity of classroom interaction between teachers and unaccompanied teenagers seeking asylum in Norway. These teenagers find themselves within legal and political 'grey areas' where educational goals specific to their extreme situations are unavailable to them, and they end up being either forgotten in the system or closely monitored for possible failure. Their teachers encounter these teenagers in their realities; new to a culture, new language, new ways of being and doing, in addition to past traumatic experiences and overt monitoring by authorities. These unaccompanied teenagers have varied school experiences, lacking in many ways the cultural and educational knowledge in addition to language competencies needed to be in a high school. We explore what it might mean to teach in such circumstances where unresolvable dilemmas exist within a political school system that is ambivalent towards them and seems to be setting them on an exclusion trajectory within schools. Based on interviews with teachers and observations in two high schools on the west coast of Norway, we describe and interpret anecdotal narrative examples in the light of the continental phenomenology of practice methodology. We explore the existential educational possibilities that lie in moments when teaching appears to have failed, teachers seem not to know what to do, what kind of responsibility to take, or what kind of repercussions their actions might have on their students. The article argues that when education is controlled to the degree of possible outcomes, it thwarts meaningful encounters that would have been possible between the teachers and their young students.

**Keywords:** asylum-seeking children, education, existential moments, migration, phenomenology, relation

## Introduction

Much of what happens in educational policy and research worldwide has a significant impact on how we practise, understand and plan education in European societies. The hegemony of theoretical and abstract educational thinking as a means for political and economic aims (Biesta, 2014; Masschelein & Simons, 2013) takes for granted that education should serve some purpose outside of itself, like the job market, economic growth, knowledge production or individual flourishing. Vlieghe and Zamojski (2021), in the name of the *Geisteswissenschaftliche* tradition, claim that education should be immanent, on its own terms, with practices valuable *in* and *for* themselves. Even if educational aims are good – like democracy, social justice, or equity – the idea that education should be in service for some ideals or ideological qualities is problematic as we see it. Along with Vlieghe and Zamojski (2021), our view is that education needs to be unencumbered and as free as possible from societal claims, even though it takes place in our pluralistic society and encounters human life and history's challenges. We fear that the very meaning of education as *education* is at stake today because education is understood either as a function for something else or as a solution to societal

problems. The former stance argues that educational aims are for something outside of itself, and although the goals are reasonable, they make education a means. This is what Smeyers and Depaepe (cited in Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2021, p. 34) call 'educationalisation of societal problems'. Phenomena like mental health, unemployment, or inclusion become individual problems that strategic education has to master or solve. We, in contrast, understand education as an existential practice, dealing with the concrete and tangible realities of life, the realities of the lives of children and young people that happen to be of the right age and exposed to educational claims. In particular, here, we are interested in the lives of unaccompanied teenagers between 15 and 18 years old who are seeking asylum in Norway and their educationally demanding and culturally marginal existence in school. We explore the unresolvable dilemmas of teaching them in Norwegian high schools in a political system that is ambivalent towards them, while at the same time setting them on an exclusion trajectory in schools.

## The Norwegian political context

Norway is among the European countries with strict immigration laws that grant residence, asylum or refugee status for

unaccompanied minors on the grounds of protection (Kalisha, 2020a). Once unaccompanied teenagers are allowed entry to Norway, they are processed and given an opportunity for age assessment,<sup>2</sup> which, if they reject, impacts their credibility in the asylum-seeking process. The length of stay and when the interview will be is the preserve of the case officers handling their cases. Thus, they are put in a state of uncertainty, with total reliance on the caregivers at the reception centres and in schools, if given the opportunity. Reception centres are categorised according to age: Those below 15 and those between 15 and 18 years old. The teenagers of this study, between 15 and 18 years old, are placed under the Department of Immigration (UDI).<sup>3</sup> The UDI takes on 'multiple roles as *both* the decision-making authority, placement authority, caregiver, and supervisory authority (Kalisha, 2020a, p. 187; emphasis added). Additionally, the reception centre's 'staff are employed both by the UDI and have been deployed' (Engebrigtsen, 2020, p. 168) to further the interests of the UDI. The multiplicity of roles here, even though not necessarily intended, affects trust between the teenagers, the UDI, and other adults or agencies involved in their care. Sometimes the overlapping of roles complicates caregiving where in some instances no one takes responsibility for them.

Political and legal circumstances in Norway allow teenagers entry as minors (below 18 years old), but do not promise resettlement. Instead, sporadic legal changes in the recent past have cemented a temporalising of their residency permits until they are 18 years old for them to be deported as adults. They might first discover this when they get a rejection of their residence permits. Since they are neither minors (below 15) nor adults (above 18), their state of being in-between (15–18-year-olds) casts them in a legal limbo; considering them children is decidedly not possible and considering them as asylum seekers is often improbable. Thus, to stay temporarily becomes the official political discourse. The uncertainty of settlement within this temporal period becomes a reality when they are kept waiting for asylum interviews. No one knows when the interview will be, or if they will be given non-renewable temporary residence permits (Kalisha, 2020b; 2021; Kalisha & Saevi, 2020). In educational policy, they are hidden in other general categories like newcomers or immigrant children. This effectively marginalises them in society, while at the same time rendering them unimportant in national educational planning and strategy.

Unaccompanied minors are commonly seen as having suffered trauma or are already understood as problematic children in policy (Djampour, 2018; Stretmo, 2014). In the education policy (see Kalisha, 2020a), they are classified as failures because educationally in the sense that they often fail in standardised tests and are seen as having learning difficulties. Additionally, both policy makers and teachers have been struggling with how to deal with newly arrived immigrant students, including unaccompanied minors. Teachers in Norwegian upper secondary schools in Hilt's (2016; 2017) assessment see unaccompanied minors as lacking necessary skills (language and self-managing skills) relevant for introductory classes and ordinary classes. Thus, their past experiences are disregarded, and they are taught what is available in the Norwegian curriculum. The teachers' worries as documented go as far as to indicate that such student newcomers do not meet the 'requirements to be in the mainstream classes' (Hilt, 2017, p. 591) since their insufficiencies and 'problems' frequently will lead to eventual

dropout. Policy articulations support this view by indicating that unaccompanied teenagers between the ages of '16–18 years of age are a difficult group to educate and integrate' in society, and especially those of a non-Western origin (Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2012).

In her study on newly arrived immigrant teenagers in upper secondary schools in Norway, Hilt (2016) concludes that the pressure from international organisations, like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, makes Norwegian schools have a mantra that students should take responsibility for their learning. The ongoing emphasis on national and international testing in addition to seeing tested skills as the 'new global currency of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century economy' (Hilt, 2016, pp. 678) complicate what it means to educate students with a complex background like those in this study. Politically, there is a fear of their eventual exclusion from society since poor foundational skills lead to both 'economic disadvantages and total dependency on social benefits' (Hilt, 2016, p. 679). Additionally, the expectation for students in upper secondary to 'self-manage' and be responsible for their own learning is problematic. It removes the responsibility from the teacher and is more troubling for newcomers with varied school experiences (Hilt, 2017). The idea of self-managing learners is paradoxical in the sense that preference is given to learning over teaching, and the teacher becomes a facilitator of the learning environments. This is a development in Scandinavia from the early 2000s. Since then, the term didactics, which means 'the art of teaching', has been narrowly interpreted as various forms of 'learning discourses' (Säljö, 2000, cited in Säfström et al., 2015, p. 5). Didactics has become the invention and promotion of efficient methods for the students to optimise their learning, without awareness of the realities of children's lifeworlds, or on what life might be like for persons at the margins of society, like those in this study. Biesta suggests that the increasingly heightened claims on the teacher indeed are

linked to rather narrow views on what education is supposed to 'produce' taking their cues from large scale measurement systems such as PISA [Programme for International Student Assessment] which continue to focus on academic achievement in a small and selective number of domains and subject areas (2016, p. 75).

The teacher as a human being with the professional purpose of acting educationally responsible, making good educational judgments and balancing the domains of qualification and socialisation with subjective and educational purposes (Biesta, 2012) seems all too often to be ignored, left out, or merely forgotten. We are interested in what teaching is. We believe that teaching seemingly peripheral students like unaccompanied minors might provide insight into some of the primary teaching structures and perhaps teach us something about teaching as such.

What does teaching involve for young people that are new to the Norwegian culture, language and practices? Teachers of these unaccompanied teenagers, like all teachers today, are supposed to practise education as designed and planned. The practice is performed with learning outcomes, tests and specific teaching methods to sustain planned qualifications and economic goals. Teachers and students, in the case of unaccompanied minors, are in a situation where these regular educational practices might not work or are unavailable to them due to

language, culture and life experience barriers. Yet, the encounter with the teenagers in their realities – which is that they are new to a culture, new to a language, new to ways of being and doing in a new culture, and in addition might have past traumatic experiences – are all dilemmas that influence education. In this article, we focus on the complexity of possibilities in the classroom situations where in some instances teaching appears to have failed, or teachers seem not to know what to do, or what kind of responsibility to take. It is precisely these dilemmas that make education meaningful in the teachers' and students' lives, and in how they are who they are, teacher or student. We see their messy situations as educationally meaningful, and think of the moments in terms of what might have been educationally possible. In this article, it is the teachers' perspective that is our central focus.<sup>4</sup>

## Methodology

As part of a PhD project,<sup>5</sup> one of the researchers spent two years with unaccompanied minors in the reception centres where they lived, and in the schools where they were admitted. The researcher interviewed four ethnic Norwegian teachers with a competence in teaching Norwegian as a second language, teaching in two high schools,<sup>6</sup> and ten unaccompanied teenagers between 15 and 18. Two teachers in one school agreed to a two-week follow-up through classroom observation, and then a focus group interview. The remaining two, in another school, were interviewed on their school premises. The interviews' purpose was primarily to open room for exploring the lived experience of teaching through relevant and meaningful descriptions of lived teaching realities in the classroom. The interviews happened when most of the unaccompanied youths had received a rejection of their asylum application. This timing implied that their classroom participation had either been cut short or was about to be cut short. This timing was decisive because it allowed the teachers to reflect on several vital examples while teaching them. The role of the examples that teachers reflect on was to portray concrete situations as the teachers themselves described them. In this way, we tried to bring forth subjective and intersubjective human experiences of what teaching is in the day-to-day reality of lived life.

The data collected via classroom observations and interviews were transcribed and thematised. Our interest is in a situated practice-oriented phenomenological reflection on the meaning of teaching young people who are new to a country, language and culture and are waiting for legal status. To reflect on research is to put ourselves in the position to allow the teaching phenomenon to tell us its story to better understand it. We read and re-read the transcripts, including listening to the actual interview recordings.<sup>7</sup>

We use Max van Manen's (2014, p. 15; emphasis in original) phenomenology of practice, which 'refers to the practice of phenomenological research, and writing that reflects *on*, and *in* practice and prepares for practice'. In this phenomenological reflection, what is crucial to us is the essential meaning of the phenomenon of teaching, where it takes its own path and tells its own story, and so, the teaching phenomenon leads us. We blend pedagogical theories with phenomenologically oriented approaches, which writings allow us to glimpse existential meaning in concrete educational moments.

## Phenomenology – describing in apt words

Bollnow (1989) asserts that every theory begins with a careful and detailed description of the thing to be theorised about. Commonly we tend to believe that a description is unproblematic and straightforward, if at all necessary. We believe that we know how things are because we know how to live with them, use them and think about them. However, according to Bollnow (1989, p. 22), 'we do not see things as they represent themselves, in the fullness of their qualities' and are often 'in a sense blinded to the real appearance' of things. To describe the teaching phenomenon as it *is* rather than as an idea, we must take a step back and describe what we see. We must somehow 'penetrate the fog of our imagined ideas' (Bollnow, 1989, p. 23). Education has particular ideas, assumptions, symbols and concepts stuck to it, and these preconceived understandings influence us. The Latin term for how a discipline's language might influence us, *vocatio*, literally means a calling, a being called. Van Manen (2014) sees the aim of the *vocatio* as letting things 'speak' while listening to the evocative power of language. We need to look at practice, how things are said, done, acted and responded to. We should look at the actual reality to see a phenomenon (and the world) tangibly and comprehensively. Doing this with the teaching phenomenon might help us encounter it as it *is* rather than as we think it is.

## Hermeneutics – pointing out meaning

What is described needs interpretation – that is, 'pointing out' the meaning (Gadamer, 1986, p. 68) of the phenomenon to a larger whole. After interpreting a phenomenon, we can say that we understand something more about it. This applies equally to teaching. We need descriptions of meaningful teaching moments to recognise teaching as a pedagogical action and understand what teaching is. Therefore, interpretation is a second step in attempting to come to an educational expression for what teaching is. Bollnow (1989, p. 25) complicates this by asserting that 'understanding is co-original with life itself'. In terms of teaching as a phenomenon, this 'co-original' quality means that teaching is covered with pre-understandings. We already understand what it means, including the 'domain' in which teaching belongs, i.e. the domain of education. So, how does interpretation come into play in an already known and understood world? We might see the significance of interpretation best when our understanding is being interrupted or confused by something new, something we were not aware of, or something that does not fit in. Teaching unaccompanied minors in our study turns out to be an activity where the teachers' (and the young persons') understanding is disrupted continuously and is full of puzzling situations and misunderstandings. According to Derrida (1988), misinterpreted and confusing situations are as significant as doing things right. A deconstructive perspective might say that seemingly marginal and failing education can still be educationally meaningful. We believe that teaching is not dependant on success to be meaningful, and we try to see the teachers' examples as possibilities of educational relational meaning rather than mere failure.

## Educational anthropology – the meaning of teaching to the human experience

Phenomenology is a radical reflection on pre-reflective experience. Like all our actions as human beings, teachers' acts are partly reflective, partly pre-reflective, and unreflective. Teachers plan and carry out lessons, and in the planning and acting, they reflectively, as well as pre-reflectively and unreflectively, involve themselves. In this study, the teachers often describe seemingly fruitless teaching – i.e. teaching that creates confusion, discouragement, and frustration for the teacher as well as for the students. Nevertheless, is unsuccessful teaching still teaching? Is teaching a pedagogical task, regardless of the visible learning outcomes? Might there be qualities hidden in teaching (despite teaching being good or bad, fruitful or fruitless) that are educationally meaningful to the student and the teacher, even if learning does not occur?

Like in other studies, drafts of this article were read and commented on by teachers and other pedagogues in addition to the doctoral study's supervisors. This was done to ensure that the descriptions and reflections resonate with real life and are recognisable to relevant practitioners as possible human experiences (Van Manen, 1991). The study is part of a doctoral dissertation and received the required ethical research permission from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). The empirical data material is anonymised and made confidential according to the established ethical regulations, and all participants consented. There is no conflict of interest between the institutions involved directly or indirectly in the study.

### Preparing for teaching

Mapping students' level of knowledge is frequently used to find out where to start teaching. Educational organisers tend to believe that applying a chronological structure to teaching facilitates students' learning. Before teacher Trude (one of the participants in this study) meets her students for the first time, she starts with a mapping test to estimate their Norwegian language knowledge. She has prepared the test, and her students are waiting at the computer lab:

*I felt nervous as I approached this computer lab. I knew I would meet new students with new energy and ready to learn, or so I was told. Knowing where to start was important; armed with a computer-based mapping test, I went to class 1B for them to do it, for me to determine where to place them in this high school. Therefore, after reading the instructions, I clicked the timer, and the test started.*

Trude wants to know where to start teaching, and she follows the routines of the current system when approaching new students to meet them 'where they are'. The computer test – so she believes – will give her the required insight into her students' levels of knowledge, which then will be the right point to start teaching. Trude is anxious before meeting the students, although she will not meet them in person until later.

The teacher informs the students about how the test works and clicks the timer to start the test. Trude, as the teacher should, takes the lead here. She prepares for learning to begin. In this system, learning begins after placement. Where should

they be placed? Some students are placed directly in an ordinary upper secondary school, others start with introductory classes, while others have a combination of introductory classes and ordinary classes in upper secondary schools (see Kalisha, 2021), their previous educational experiences notwithstanding.

However, something unplanned happens. While walking among the students, Trude discovers that some of them are not working on the test. She says:

*As I walked around the room, I noticed that Katu, Kuala and Namu were playing with the computer mouse looking for something that was not there. Whereas Katia, Ibrahim and Suleiman concentrated intensely on their screens and clicked away at the questions. The fiddling and uneasiness that I saw in Namu made me move closer to him and ask whether he needed help.*

Namu's response is interesting. Trude recounts:

*He hesitantly nodded his head. At first, he said he did not need my help, but reluctantly he followed me outside to the hallway to explain his problem. 'I do not understand anything', he says. 'What do you mean?' 'How do I open the computer? How do I do the exam?', he says. 'You mean you cannot open the program, or you mean you cannot do the test?' 'Everything', he says.*

The teacher and the student have identified the problem: Namu cannot access the test. He does not understand how to start the computer and find the test he is supposed to take. The teacher expects the students to conform to the test's pre-set criteria to find out where they are so that their learning can start. However, learning, as noted, is obstructed already before it has even started. In Namu's case, the teacher's expertise seemed to fall short when the unexpected situations' reality hit her. But how does she proceed?

### Conformity required

One of the broader intentions with school is to promote socialisation. Lippitz (2007, pp. 78–79) sees socialisation as 'the integration of new generations into the existing society through exclusionary and homogenizing practices and processes'. According to the demand for socialisation, the newness and otherness of students like Namu and his classmates need to be suitably assimilated and disturbing irregularities curbed. Socialisation is a premise for learning, and some would say the only and most important premise. In the case above, a seasoned teacher is caught off guard by an unexpected revelation that renders the encounter with a student awkward and reveals an unexpected situation. During this encounter, the teacher is close, trying to listen as hard as possible through the incoherent Norwegian sentences that the student is trying to make. Namu again, says:

*I do not want to be here. I am here because I need the allowance from the government. If I do not come, your report will deny me the allowance, and other consequences might follow. I do not want to be in school, and I want to work, forget about what I left behind and start a new life.*

The teacher is faced with Namu's situation: he needs the teacher's progress report as a testimonial to a desire for integration in Norway. Trude's dilemma and responsibility are to make order of disorder and see that the pre-test is adequately completed by all students. Nevertheless, Namu's concern presents her with two dilemmas. She needs completion to solve her problem of where to start the students' actual learning process. Namu needs to complete the pre-test to continue his process of becoming a resident in Norway. The teacher's attempt to conform and homogenise the pre-test process was not successful. An unanticipated problem, a foreign intrusion of education, is supposed to be overcome, which is Trude's and Namu's intention. Lippitz (2007, p. 83) suggests that in education, '[f]oreignness appears...only as something preliminary and temporary'. Foreignness, or unfamiliarity, is a problem that is supposed to end, be removed and changed to the *same* over a relatively short time of socialisation. However, in Namu and Trude's situation, foreignness seems to stay and disrupt the contact, the relation and the situation by its disorder and lack of a solution. Schooling, as we see in the case above, is considered a representational space. The newcomers must be known beforehand (by taking the pre-test) so that the teacher can tailor appropriate curriculum(s) to fit their needs.

Nevertheless, the actual encounter between teachers and students often, like in Namu's case, is punctuated by a kind of messiness that ruptures the conforming orderliness of the teacher's lesson plan and intentions. Therefore, in pedagogical practice, didactical moments and the actual pedagogical intentions cannot be separated. Trude and Namu depend on each other's actions for their actions to gain fruition and be successful. It is true here that human action enduringly resists any attempts of individuals to master the situation fully (Arendt, 1958). The teacher and the student commonly act interdependently, which also seems to be the case here. If education were to produce 'subject-ness' instead of socialisation as described above, the didactical practice would demand a restrained attitude from the teacher. One cannot achieve this attitude by knowing whom to encounter beforehand, but by taking responsibility for the situations that arise and for the other person that we will encounter, as Hopmann (2008) suggests.

Subjectification, as opposed to socialisation, is an event that addresses possibilities rather than factuality and pre-planned educational actions. Didactical practices in the case of the student's 'subject-ness' (as well as the teacher's) have to be contextual and provisional. They are acts that cannot be repeated and made 'into routines and best practices' (Sævi, 2020, p. 101). Schooling as a representational act, where education is pre-planned and the outcome of education should be known in advance, like in Trude and Namu's case, is the opposite of educating for subjectiveness and freedom, as we see it. Schooling, interested in the freedom of students, is presentational rather than representational in its intention. A presentational didactic act is open to the moment and the other as a foreigner, as an other that the teacher cannot fully predict. The educational moment that happened between Trude and Namu, despite the unsuccessful computer test, might instead be the moment where the teacher was confronted by the student's shortcoming and helplessness that disrupted her pre-planned course of learning. Here, in this particular moment of disruption, the teacher's plan was toppled by a real-world event: The fact that Namu was unable to fulfil the test. The burden of

Namu's (problematic) educational moment was thrown back onto the teacher's shoulders. The question of how to precede now became her responsibility. She could no longer rely on educational truths (i.e. a mapping test makes sure where to start learning) or her pre-knowledge about international students' educational needs (i.e. integration requires socialisation and homogenisation of the students). At this moment, she must use her senses and her imagination to find out how to respond to Namu's interruption of her plan. Somehow the situation reveals to her the risky relationality we must live under, and to which education as an existential event is bound. The world's own integrity forces itself upon her by her student's technical limitation and educational disinterest.

### Responsible responsibility

Rancière (1991) argues that if teaching only leads young people to learn – or to be tested for more effective learning – this means that the young person does not have any valuable knowledge, but is dependent on the teacher. He or she is considered an object rather than a subject of education. Education understood like this by nature is authoritarian and presupposes 'adjustment to a framework of self-realization' (Säfström, 2018, p. 2). Säfström's further concern is that immigrants encounter discriminatory language from the start by being called 'immigrants' or 'asylum-seekers', or 'unaccompanied minors'. The language has words that include self-evident interpretations and are inherently exclusive of those who do not belong. Our point is not to claim that democracy is biased or relates to a biased culture as its frame of reference. Our concern is that education and teaching have meaning *in* and *of* themselves. Any framing of a pre-interpretation of what education or teaching is or should be is a problem for educational thinking and practice. Berg (2013, p. 275) laments that it is becoming increasingly difficult to support students' well-being since their 'need for extra support and assistance is in practice determined through hierarchic professional strains, testing, and diagnosis'. Teaching by nature involves making situationally demanding decisions that sometimes are disruptive and eventually address the very core of what it means to be a teacher, like in Trude and Namu's case. Contrary to educational teaching, which is a democratic act originating from authority and freedom, hierarchy is commonly built on authoritarian traits and works against pedagogical intentions. Teacher Mona gives an example:

*Adnan is a shy and timid boy when one looks at him, but very aggressive towards his peers, sometimes making others uneasy. I noticed that he does not hand in his assignments on time, and sometimes he forgets to submit them entirely. On several occasions, I have talked to him about his behaviour, and he remained quiet. Then I thought of coming up with a rule, a technique we were taught in a seminar that is effectively correcting bad behaviour. It is called consequence pedagogy. I clarify to the student that if he does several wrong things a certain number of times per week, I have to call for a meeting with the departmental head to explain why he did what he did, and after that, a consequence follows. Adnan remained adamant and did not do his assignments for the period I had told him and was absent most of the time. In the end, I had to report him*

*to the head of the department and the psychologist. Their final assessment after listening to me was that his studies have to be terminated. I felt numb. This was a challenging moment for me. I tried to be on the student's side and asked for more time to talk to him so that he could see the implications of what he was doing, but the psychologist and pedagogical leader agreed that he had to be sent out of school since the rules had been broken.*

The teacher wants to do the right thing by trying out professional knowledge and decision-making in a rather tense classroom situation. According to the rules, the existing school structures favour a hierarchy of responsibility that cannot be shared, and everyone must do his or her own work. For example, when it comes to categories of children who are disabled or with indiscipline issues, it is the departmental head and the psychologist's responsibility. This situation demands the teacher's decision in action, including considering the consequences of her choices. However, the knowledge of what might become an 'after-action' might sometimes be partly not be reflected in the action itself, like Mona in the situation above. She was not prepared for the consequences that followed her reporting but had envisaged a professionally aided but pedagogically responsible action in the classroom.

To Mona, teaching is more than just subject matter delivery and punishing a wrong. But her reporting had adverse effects on Adnan. As the situation is, she cannot talk the two superiors out of their decision, and she has no access to the student to apologise for her action. She is caught in the middle, between the student and the system. She cannot rescind her decision and be on the student's side nor can she support the system. The expectation for these teenagers from the government is to be 'integrated' into society, albeit temporarily, as they wait for their asylum responses. School only becomes an experiment for integration where each actor, like teachers, are 'just one link in a long chain, and they see and have the ability to control only the next link; they can neither see nor control the ultimate and overall aims' (Biesta, 2004, p. 246). The UDI controls the system in such a way that teachers, caregivers and school heads report deviance, and write progress reports about these teenagers to keep the system efficient. This eventually stifles professionalism and responsibility among psychologists, teachers and school leaders. The problem is that Mona did not see her action's real consequences before being taught something decisive about pedagogical acting in the aftermath.

To Mona, the problems with Adnan were something she was planning to deal with in the classroom. She wanted advice and was naïve enough to follow the hierarchic rules. Regardless of the result she ended up with, she knows that education is rarely good or bad, but always intrinsically worthwhile because one as a teacher has to deal with children and young persons as persons. Thus, what is problematic should be dealt with in education with educational means, meaning that what might be seen as misbehaviour, aggression, or indifference are educational challenges rather than juridical or ethical issues. On the contrary, in today's educational system, Adnan's problems are considered behavioural problems that should be treated according to the school's regulations, rather than as a pedagogical challenge in need of pedagogical solutions. Sometimes one, like Mona, in the moment of decision, cannot imagine what is to come, for

what is to come cohabits this togetherness, this undefinable acquiescence that we wish would exist in.

Van Manen and Adams (2014, p. 609) ask how a teacher can 'identify and "form" oneself in the everyday experience of the pedagogical encounter...in the life of the child?'. Here, what is at stake and is missing is precisely the togetherness – the advantage and the suffering of being in the world with others. The pedagogical relation, as Mona intended, rests on the insight that the adult is asymmetrically responsible for the child or young person through a hesitation to act and to remain aware that justice for the child and this relationality cannot be achieved through laws and/or regulations (Saevi, 2015). Teaching can easily be reduced to a technical skill to support students' learning and learning outcomes, and in such a view, teaching is not valuable in itself but gets its value from the outside. Van Manen and Adams wonder what it is like for a teacher to identify with the child and their situation. Care and concern go beyond knowledge and behaviour, as Mona also shows, as care is the basis of all relationships and the most human thing in humanity. So, what might be educationally fruitful here is recognising the significance of teaching as a relational act that has its limitations. In Mona and Adnan's situation, this is evident in the teacher's moral orientation to the child or young person despite this person's lack, problems, or condition. Teaching pedagogically might trump hierarchic regulations, although it does not succeed every time.

## Existential education

In the anecdote below, we observe teacher Eva during her first interaction with unaccompanied youths in her class:

*Eva is teaching about fairy tales in an introduction class for unaccompanied minors. She enters the class prepared with a story of 'Little Red Riding Hood'. She carefully lays her books on the table, greets her students, and introduces what she will teach. She picks up a printout of this fairy tale, glances over the classroom, and begins to read. As she reads it, there is uneasiness in the class. Some students tap each other, others giggle, and still others are busy on their phones. She raises her head when the muttering disrupts her reading and issues a warning: 'Can you be quiet and attentive to the story? I hope you all know it is not allowed to use phones in class'. She continues reading. When she finishes reading, she looks at the students intensely and asks, 'Who can remind us who Little Red Riding Hood is?' There is intense silence. No one wants to respond. The tension here is momentarily tangible; those pupils who were giggling straighten up quickly, fake seriousness and innocence. Then Moha asks in a faint voice, in broken Norwegian, naively, 'do you mean like red, blood-colour? Or what?' Ms. Eva looks shocked. She turns around and looks at the students. They all seem to know she is not pretending; she is shocked. She responds firmly in Norwegian, 'No, I did not mean blood, Moha.' Turning around to the rest, she asks, 'Is there anyone else that has understood what I just read?' No response. Then she says [no longer speaking Norwegian – but switching to English]: 'Ok, forget about Red Riding Hood, can anyone tell us a story, any*

*story they know. For example, where an animal did something like what human beings do?'. At this point, some students look down, while others look sideways to avoid eye contact with the teacher. Looking at her, I could notice the desperation in her eyes, her lesson plan thrown in disarray. She moves around the class as if to gather her thoughts and pass time, but time seems to tick away slowly.*

The teacher's intention might be to derive a specific meaning from the fairy tale and its importance in learning the Norwegian language and culture. Initially, such stories would be told by parents or guardians performatively to children enacting a real-life social situation that is both imaginative and educational, or as bedtime stories. Eva reads this story and asks the students for a response so that her educational intent could be taken further. This might not be the wisest of decisions, but it is how she has decided. The intensity of the situation renders a new meaning to what it means not to speak. The teacher and her students are speechless. Their speechlessness could be accounted for if we look at the asymmetry of language proficiency. However, our interest is in the moment of teaching, which is interrupted. Eva's speech is 'no longer related to a particular code or orientation' (Vansieleghem & Masschelein, 2012, p. 93). She must think on her feet about what to do next. This, however, is not unusual for a teacher, but is nevertheless uncomfortable.

What does this situation demand from the teacher? How does teaching in the moment of no response, even no understanding, move from trying to cultivate the students in Norwegian history and tradition by introducing them to a well-known fairy tale, toward a situation where sense is lost, and meaning is disrupted? How should we understand such a move? Is it educationally negative or positive? Biesta (2016, p. 842) distinguishes between several forms of education. Education can be 'un-educational, didactical, or indoctrinatory'. These terms might be understood as non-educative teaching: Un-educational education – education with no purpose or aim; didactical education – build on particular methods; and indoctrinatory teaching – producing the same (ideology, repetition). They all lack the 'outside' aptness or existential quality of an educative education. They are approaches to education that start and end within the cultural bonds and aims that they represent. Existential education, or education that comes to the student from the outside, always interrupts the status quo. Then, how can we understand the educational qualities of the teaching that disrupted the event above? How can we argue that Eva's failed teaching nevertheless has educational qualities which are perhaps more significant than the educational qualities she planned for?

### **When things go wrong, education might still happen**

For the youths in this study, education seems to be limited to what it is possible to say in the Norwegian tradition, rather than what might be possible to say educationally. Lévinas (2006) rejects the interpretive movement where what is *other* is being adjusted to my understanding, and in this case, to the cultural interpretation sustaining Norwegian education. It complies with a commonly accepted, but perhaps not infallible, old didactical principle: teaching is about trying to grow and deepen what is

already there in the student and incorporating new knowledge into the old. It also seems to be the basic principle behind teaching unaccompanied youths, as evident in the mapping test, the hierarchy of decisions in Adnan's case, and the assumption that fairy tales are universal and educationally right for (adult) students. Lévinas (2006, p. 26) suggests the opposite undertaking. He insists that the work that needs to be done is 'a movement of the Same toward the Other that never returns to the Same'. This, in short, means that teaching, as an existential event, is about giving without expecting to receive anything in return from the students, not even learning, comprehension or results. Biesta (2001, p. 38) asserts that education is educational only if it helps young people 'to go on in the face of others who may go on – have the right to go on – differently'.

What, if anything, might come out of failed educational situations like those described above? When education is disrupted, the teacher-student relationship and the purpose and reason for education become visible. Teaching is always shaped by some intentions from the teacher (like measuring the level of knowledge or adapting students to a culturally significant quality), but the learning does not have to happen; teaching does not have to pay out. When teaching goes wrong, the teacher might discover that teaching and learning are more complex than anticipated. The point might not be that students learn, but that there is a certain content and a specific reason for teaching. Teachers might realise that students are not objects for learning but subjects of existence. They might discover that if 'the truth' of education is already established and agreed upon as something that the students only will get via the teachers' knowledge provision, then difference, uncertainty, ambivalence and democracy are not possible. The problem with this understanding – or so they might realise – is that education might be narrowly reduced to bringing knowledge that they as teachers have, or which the society intends for the teacher to deliver to the student. In this sense, curriculum and classroom teaching are interlinked. It is as if education is completed when certain content is transferred to someone, or if 'students just pay enough attention', they will learn (Säfström et al., 2015, p. 7). Teaching experience shows that this is not necessarily the situation. Students might want to, but cannot learn, or they might not understand what is expected from them, or they might have personal issues that keep them from learning the pre-planned content. Or there is a distance that hinders any togetherness or encounter that could make education possible. What other options does education have? Are there alternatives to successful learning?

We, as readers, might realise that for teachers 'teaching is not that which controls knowledge, but is that which translates knowledge, making it contingent and situated (or not) in the lives of the students' (Säfström et al., 2015, p. 10). Herein lies the possibility for freedom and transformation for young people, a point that neither teacher nor student might yet see. However, teaching might open an opportunity for freedom from the student's and the teacher's ego in the world and themselves as part of this world. Education, seen this way, should be 'education for making a life' (Säfström et al., 2015, p. 269), not merely earning a living or becoming a citizen. In our case, freedom of life seems to be stifled. The risk of daring to educate differently or relate to the teenagers is left in the control of the authorities. The examples we have used so far portray realities that are paradoxical and unresolvable. In a way, they leave the teacher and student



helpless in the hands of the authorities. Yet, within these realities, we see the possibility of seeing education differently.

When education's goal is narrowly understood as learning and learning outcomes, we might wonder if the only role left for the young is to 'learn how to be individual agents fit for a competitive arena occupied by other individual agents' (Säfström et al., 2015, p. 11). If this is so, there seems to be an end to thinking differently or even to being different. In the context of people who come to Norway from a distinctly different place in the world, we consider 'difference' and being different both a general educational question and an ethical question. The other is not the same as me, or my product, interpretation, or construction. A relevant question is if unaccompanied youths from faraway countries might be considered the new generation. The other, the student (like the teacher), is *other* – the one addressed by me and the one that addresses me. Meaning, communication and relationships are not about exchanging opinions or views, but about responsible events from the outside that address the ego, and most importantly, are anchored in reality. Education is not first and foremost about professional expertise, but as Arendt (2006, p. 193) suggests, education is an act that springs out of 'love for the world'. Teaching as love for the things of the world is an attitude that invites us to explore the world in terms of its qualities, its goodness, and its valuable possibilities. Loving the world opens it for curious inquiry about which of its contents and qualities might be good enough to pass on to the next generation (Mollenhauer, 2014). Teaching as a kind of love of the world (as opposed to hate) is less oriented to the practice of skills and expertise than to care and concern. However, the real question is if our educational love for the world is strong enough to be passed on to the next generation, especially when the young of the next generation do not belong to our own culture, religion, or ethnicity?'

### Endnotes

- 1 We use a loose translation of this word with the help of Biesta where this term in German 'sees itself as an interested discipline closely connected to the normativity of educational practice, and as a discipline that focuses on the study of [meaningful] human action, not on the study of [observable and measurable] human behavior' [Biesta, 2015, p. 672]
- 2 Age assessments were a common practice of age determination until 2019 when the University of Oslo teaching and referral hospital ejected the request to perform both dental and bone tissue scans, citing potential ethical issues (Lidén, 2019).
- 3 UDI – *Utlendingsdirektoratet* – The Department of Immigration.
- 4 We see the need to balance both sides (students and teachers) and this has been done in other studies that explores the students' challenges (Kalisha, 2020a; 2020b; Kalisha & Saevi, 2020).
- 5 This article is part of a doctoral dissertation, and covers three out of the four studies in the doctoral dissertation.
- 6 The two high schools admitted unaccompanied minors to either learn Norwegian in introductory classes, or follow ordinary teaching while learning Norwegian.
- 7 For the purposes of this article and the limits of our chosen topic, we have used anecdotal examples of three teachers to explore the phenomenon of teaching. For a larger overview of the doctoral dissertation, see the rest of the studies in Kalisha (2020a; 2020b) and Kalisha and Saevi (2020).

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