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Recognising the newcomer: education policy and teaching practices in Norway and England

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Education policies in different countries recognise the needs and abilities of newcomer students in different ways, with consequences for their social inclusion and academic progress at school. We highlight the importance of context to debates around the politics of recognition in newcomer education by drawing on qualitative research in Norwegian and English secondary schools. Taylor's (1994) political theory of "recognition" provides the analytical lens through which we explore how teachers perceive newcomer students to be recognised (or not) in national education policies in each country. We underscore teachers' agency in responding to these policies through their own politics of recognition at school.

KEYWORDS

education, refugees, asylum seekers, teacher, qualitative, comparative

Introduction

In recent years, globalisation, the expansion of the European Union, climate change, and increased ethnic conflict have driven higher levels of migration and displacement to European countries, including Norway and England. Questions of "recognition" have since become central to academic and policy debates around rights, citizenship, and belonging in the context of migration and displacement. Research has examined the biopolitical implications of migration status and how this status is recognised by different parties, including the United Nations, the host state, and non-governmental organisations (Zetter, 1991; Fassin, 2005; Vertovec, 2007; Sanyal, 2012; Crawley and Skleparis, 2018; Erdal and Oeppen, 2018; Sigona, 2018). A number of studies have also explored how different types of recognition in migration and social care policies – legal, social, and emotional – influence the wellbeing of young newcomers, for instance in relation to unaccompanied asylum seekers (Chase, 2017; Sirriyeh and Ní Raghallaigh, 2018; Kauhanen and Kaukko, 2020; Larkin and Lefevre, 2020; Johansen and Bendixsen, 2023). Larkin and Lefevre (2020) point to the ways in which unaccompanied young females in the UK are represented in social care policy as vulnerable, passive, and dependent. They suggest that social care practitioners can both reproduce and challenge these representations in their relationships with unaccompanied young females. In recognising the young women's agency as resilient individuals, social care practitioners also draw attention to their own agency as actors who are capable of unsettling policy norms in their everyday practices.

Education is a key site of belonging for young newcomers in host societies (Sarr and Mosselson, 2010; Rutter, 2015; Bartlett et al., 2017). In schools, the politics of recognition is significant for the academic progression and social inclusion of young newcomers. Norozi (2019) observes that newcomer students arrive at school with a huge variety of educational, linguistic, cultural, social and emotional abilities and needs. How these abilities and needs are recognised in education policy at both national and school level is crucial to newcomer attainment and inclusion at school. This has been shown in relation to language support (Arnot and Pinson, 2005; Allen, 2006; Hilt, 2017); mental health support (Gladwell and Chetwynd, 2018; Norozi, 2023); and “multicultural” models of education (Sidhu and Taylor, 2007; Banks, 2013; Skrefsrud, 2022). An emerging body of research has also started to explore how education professionals negotiate policy structures in responding to newcomer needs and abilities at school. McIntyre and Hall (2018), for example, examine how headteachers in England navigate systemic challenges, including newcomer “invisibility” in national educational discourse, to their inclusive stances towards newcomers at school. Haggström et al. (2020) show how teachers in Denmark connect with, and draw on, external support structures to promote newcomer wellbeing at school, but also experience constraints with these structures. Nevertheless, a gap remains in our knowledge about how education professionals – particularly teachers – interpret policies of newcomer recognition in their everyday practices (Norozi, 2023).

This article attempts to address this gap in knowledge on the basis of empirical research, presenting findings from focus groups and individual interviews with teachers of newly arrived students in Norway and England. We explore how teachers in each country negotiate national policy structures of newcomer recognition in their own practices in the classroom. “Newcomers” are defined here as individuals who have arrived in the country within the last 5 years. This comparative approach is analytically fruitful because it highlights the contingency of teaching practices on education policies in different countries, while also accounting for contextual nuances and distinctions. Comparative approaches in this regard are relatively rare: as McIntyre and Hall, (2018) note, educational research on new arrivals often has a one-sided national perspective. The article uses Taylor’s (1994) theory of “recognition” as an analytical lens. Before describing Taylor’s theory as part of the research methodology, the article provides a brief overview of newcomer education policies in Norway and England.

Newcomer education in Norway and England

In Norway, newcomer education is organised around language ability rather than newcomer status *per se*. The 1998 Norwegian Education Act identifies language learning as the most pressing need of newly arrived minority language students, and thereby establishes their right to Norwegian language programmes. The inclusion of newly arrived minority language students in the overwhelmingly public and local community-based school system is predicated on students acquiring sufficient Norwegian language proficiency to follow instruction in regular classes. For students aged 16 or over, this

objective is combined, where necessary, with subject instruction to compensate for missing or interrupted education. In Norwegian education policy, newcomers are often categorised as “minority language pupils”, defined as having a mother tongue other than Norwegian or Sami (Hilt, 2017). They are commonly referred to as “newly arrived minority language pupils” (NAMLPs). NAMLPs are usually placed in reception or introduction (also known as “intro”) classes (*mottaksklasser*) where they are taught the Norwegian language and receive remedial education. When newcomers “master the Norwegian language “sufficiently” (a relatively vague term), both orally and in writing, they are transferred to mainstream classes’ (Norozi, 2023:2).

In England, the proportion of students from minority ethnic origins and with English as an Additional Language (EAL) has risen steadily in recent years. Unlike the Norwegian system, new arrivals to England should have immediate access to mainstream education; in practice, however, waiting times are often long (Gladwell and Chetwynd, 2018; McIntyre and Hall, 2018; McIntyre et al., 2020). Under the UK’s 2006 Education and Inspections Act, local authorities have a legal obligation to provide education for all children living in the UK. The practices and approaches of local authorities towards newcomer education vary widely in relation to data monitoring, policy development, and modes and types of wellbeing and language support (Arnot and Pinson, 2005; Pinson et al., 2010; Rutter, 2015). England’s national school inspection body “Ofsted” makes no mention of refugees or asylum seekers in its handbook, and government departments do not publish statistics on where newly arrived children are living and going to school, quality of provision, or outcomes (McIntyre and Hall, 2018). Refugee and asylum-seeking children are not “identified as a discrete group within school curriculum, assessment data, or welfare policy discourse” (McIntyre et al., 2018:11).

Methodology

The research

The article draws on qualitative data collected during a 4 years EU-funded project. The project conducted mixed methods research on the effectiveness of school-based interventions for migrant and refugee wellbeing in six European countries, including England and Norway. 14 schools participated in interventions in Norway (nine lower secondary, and five upper secondary), and two schools in England. This article uses data from three of the Norwegian secondary schools (one lower secondary, and two upper secondary) and one of the English secondary schools.

In Norway, participating schools were recruited from small and medium-sized cities with large service sectors and with populations between 11,000 and 50,000. Local authorities place refugees in housing in different municipalities while labour migrants settle in places where they are offered work. It is common, however, for both groups to move to new areas to seek work or education. The participating lower secondary schools in Norway offer reception or “introduction” programmes, either as a separate class, or a separate Norwegian learning group where newcomers spend much of their weekly schedule (learning Norwegian, and/or receiving tuition in other

subjects). In some cases, newcomers are also assigned to a mainstream class. At the Norwegian upper secondary schools that participated in the project, newcomer support is organised into “introduction” and “combination” classes. Introduction classes are a preparatory period of a maximum of 2 years before entering regular upper secondary track. They offer Norwegian learning and additional tuition in other subjects based on assessed need. In combination classes, newcomers aged 16–24 who lack compulsory education are offered adapted compulsory education (primary and lower secondary, grades 1–10), in “combination” with Norwegian language tuition.

In England, the research which contributed to this article was conducted at a secondary school in East London. The school is situated in a borough with very high levels of migration: in 2015, 63% of borough residents had arrived in the area in the last 5 years. A large number of newcomers to the school arrive throughout the school year (as “mid-phase admissions”), while a sizeable proportion of students also leave during the school year as their families follow work in other countries or they are forcibly evicted from their homes due to the high cost of living. Newcomers who are completely new to the English language receive twice-weekly, 2 hours EAL sessions during their first 12 weeks at the school. The school provides a large amount of social support to students and their families. There is a dedicated pastoral team who link families with support from local community organisations. They also help families with housing issues such as temporary homelessness. The school provides trauma support through a London-based charity to several students, including those from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

This article uses data from focus groups with teachers in three secondary schools in Norway. From the lower secondary school, the article includes the perspectives of Mari (“introduction” class teacher). From the two upper secondary schools, we hear from two introduction class teachers in one school (Hilde and Erik), and three “combination” class teachers in the other (Ingrid, Vera, and Anders). All of these teachers had been teaching newcomers for a number of years. The article uses data from a focus group with four teachers in the English school. The perspectives of all four of the participants are included here: Ana (teacher), Hamza (teacher), Kate (teacher), and Sharon (teaching assistant). It also draws on data from separate semi-structured interviews with Ana and Yonas (another teacher). As in Norway, all of these teachers had been working at the school for a number of years.

The initial aim of the focus groups was to explore newcomer wellbeing as part of the EU-funded project. Project teams in each country worked from a shared focus group guide developed by a qualitative sub-team on the project. The focus groups aimed to understand contextual influences on newcomer wellbeing, including teacher-student relationships at school. In both Norway and England, the focus groups also gave significant insight into teaching practices and teachers’ views on educational structures. In England, one-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers to capture their perspectives of, and practices in relation to, newcomer wellbeing and social inclusion. In Norway, the focus groups were conducted in Norwegian and then translated into English for the purposes of comparative analysis following transcription. The focus groups and semi-structured interviews were between 25 and 40 min on average. All of the focus groups were transcribed by project members in their respective countries.

Organising the findings

The qualitative sub-team on the EU-funded project developed a shared coding framework to analyse the focus group findings from all six countries. The coding tree framework aimed to understand and contextualise psychosocial care needs, and to identify cross-intervention and intervention-specific outcomes, working mechanisms, and context variables. Each country team used NVivo, a type of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), to code their focus group data in line with the shared coding scheme. However, for the purposes of this article, the authors chose to combine the NVivo coding with manual coding of the focus group transcripts from Norway and England. Maher et al. (2018:12) advocate this approach, noting that software packages like NVivo cannot “fully scaffold” the analysis process, and recommending that digital coding be combined with traditional materials, including coloured pens, paper, and sticky notes.

In conversation with each other via calls and email, the authors “manually” coded the focus group data from both countries (and the semi-structured interview data from England) to identify common themes in relation to teachers’ perspectives on education policies and teaching practices. We followed the iterative, manual data analysis process described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involves “writing notes on the texts you are analysing, by using highlighters or coloured pens to indicate potential patterns, or by using “post-it” notes to identify segments of data’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006:89). After much reflection and debate we decided to organise the findings into three main themes, according to teachers’ perceptions of:

- 1 Classroom integration
- 2 Pastoral care
- 3 Exam preparation

The findings show how teachers in both Norway and England perceive teaching practices with newcomers in each area to be influenced by national education policies. We do not aim to compare the influence of introduction or combination class structures on teaching practices, although this presents an important avenue for further research in the Norwegian context. Neither do we seek to compare school policies within each country; the imbalance in the number of schools included from each country (one in England, three in Norway) is therefore not considered a threat to the integrity of our analysis. Nevertheless, we have sought to mitigate this imbalance by including the perspectives of a similar number of teachers from each country (five in England, six in Norway). Ethical approval for the research in both countries was received from ethics committees at the University of Sussex in England, and the Regional Committees for Medical Research Ethics in Norway. All participants were assured of the anonymity of their responses. Pseudonyms are used for the names of all people and places in the article.

Theoretical framework

This article uses Taylor’s (1994) theory of “recognition” to analyse how a politics of recognition is embedded and played out in educational structures and teaching practices with newcomers in Norway and England. Taylor considers modern democracies to

be characterised by an overarching politics of “equal recognition” which can be understood in two distinct ways. On the one hand, a politics of “universalism” emphasises the equal dignity of all citizens and requires the equalisation of rights and entitlements. On the other, a politics of “difference” privileges the rights of particular groups on the basis of their cultural distinctiveness. Taylor explains how the two politics are distinguished by the ways in which they “recognise” citizens: “with the politics of equal dignity, what is established is meant to be universally the same, an identical basket of rights and immunities; with the politics of difference, what we are asked to recognise is the unique identity of this individual or group, their distinctness from everyone else” (Taylor, 1994:38).

The politics of recognition is highly relevant to contemporary debates about the inclusion of migrants and refugees in European societies, in particular to policies of “assimilation” and “multiculturalism”. The principle of equal respect underpinning the politics of universalism is built on the logic of “equality as sameness” – of our universal human potential – and therefore requires that “we treat people in a difference-blind fashion” (Taylor, 1994:43). Critics have argued that this politics of universalism not only homogenises but in fact reflects one hegemonic culture – “As it turns out, then, only the minority or suppressed cultures are being forced to take alien form” (Taylor, 1994:43). This is evident in assimilationist policies which place responsibility on the newcomer to learn the host country’s language and demonstrate allegiance to its purported norms and values (Watters, 2008). By contrast, the politics of difference demands that “we recognise and even foster particularity” (Taylor, 1994:43). This politics is evinced in multiculturalist policies which stress cultural distinctiveness in order to secure civil and political rights for particular “groups”. A major concern with multiculturalism, however, is that this mode of politics can homogenise and reify complex differences within these cultural “groups” (Hall, 1991; Waldron, 1992; Gilroy, 1993; Appiah, 2005; Sen, 2006; Phillips, 2007). As Appiah (1994:26) warns, rights-based approaches that emphasise distinctiveness can essentialise, and in doing so risk replacing “one kind of tyranny with another”.

Findings

The findings reveal the perceptions and experiences of teachers in relation to three key areas: newcomer integration in the classroom; pastoral care for newcomers; and preparing newcomers for examinations.

Classroom integration

Schools in England do not receive official information on the migration status of their students. Sharon, a teaching assistant at the English school, remarked,

“We haven’t really had refugees overtly identified. I mean, I haven’t pursued the matter. We haven’t had people with “refugee” labels, but I’m assuming the refugee children are the ones who just fetched up here, they know none of the language, and they just look a bit in shock, and you know, there’s a certain way they are.

But you know, children are very adaptable, so it’s a question of realising that that’s the situation, quickly. So I do in my mind identify children as refugees, if that’s what I think they are”.

Ana, a teacher at the school, noted that “mid-phase admissions” were a particularly “massive” challenge because of a lack of background information on newcomer needs:

“A lot of times we don’t know if there’s any like special needs issues. A lot of times they go undiagnosed or like we don’t get any information at all from their previous schools or anything. So it’s really difficult to kind of integrate them quickly when we literally have no idea what their situation is at all”.

Another teacher, Yonas, pointed to the difficulty of teaching newcomers who were illiterate, describing a student who had recently arrived at the school after a 4 years journey from North-East Africa:

“...he refuses to do any work...but you know, he’s been put in my class for a double lesson, and he’s not going to understand anything at all. I mean, really, you would not be surprised if, if you ask this boy, you know, ‘Do you know what photosynthesis is?’ – you know, ‘Do you know what energy is?’ anything about any simple knowledge, he won’t tell you... He hasn’t been in school, we know it, we can see it...”

Yonas felt that the student ‘should be on a reduced timetable and be taken out of a lesson and taught basic things to get him to near to where he’s supposed to be’. Ana highlighted the challenges of teaching mixed ability groups:

“Mixed ability classrooms are great when you’ve got time to plan, you’ve got additional adults in the room. A lot of factors are kind of involved with making sure that the environment is going to be great and you’re going to be able to differentiate for everyone in that class. But yeah- realistically, with the kind of time constraints that we’ve got, and the budget constraints we’ve got, it doesn’t happen”.

Ana added,

“You’re putting all that pressure on the teacher, really, like them having to develop resources and having to develop this thing and that thing. And we just don’t have enough time really. We don’t have enough time to do it properly. Um, and there’s, you know, some teaching assistants or learning support assistants who really are amazing. And like, do so much extra work with the kids and bring in their own resources and stuff. But without those kinds of people who go above and beyond, it’s just so difficult”.

In Norway, according to the 1998 Education Act, all students have the right to teaching that is adapted and tailored to their skill level and needs. However, a combination class teacher, Ingrid, highlighted the difficulties of teaching very diverse groups of students in one classroom:

“Our combination class students have insanely diverse backgrounds. I have students in my class who cannot read or write

their native language, do not even know the name of their native language, have never been to school. And then I have students with completed ‘compulsory’ from their home country [corresponding to primary and lower secondary school in the Norwegian system], who have language and concepts for everything. I’m supposed to teach these students [together, in the same class]! It’s terribly difficult to adapt my teaching”.

Pastoral care

Mari, an introduction class teacher in Norway, said that in addition to teaching newcomers,

“...we do all sorts of other things, too. Like yesterday, it was just natural for me to pop down to the library, check if there are any [newcomer] students there, help them if something’s up, former [introduction class] students, too. Like, ‘Hi!’, nudge and push a little, ‘How are you doing?’. It’s just natural. ‘You don’t have enough clothes? Here are some extra. You’re missing this or that, how can we-’, right? There’s a lot of that [...] I can get them into sports, get them going. I’ve spent a lot of time doing that. I can call different sport clubs and associations, get them trial weeks. They get to see that I pick them up at home and drive them there, do all that nitty-gritty stuff”.

Hilde, an introduction class teacher in another school, highlighted a lack of formal mental health support for newcomer students:

“An example from last year, I had a student in my class who had mental health issues or, rather, there was so much chaos for him that he was unable to benefit [academically] from attending school. But when he was granted leave of absence it was like, well- now what? Who’s going to provide for him? So we were in this, kind of, dialogue between us and social services because he was in intro class, they wanted him at school because at least that’s something, and he would be taken care of. But we saw that we couldn’t [take care of him]. His intro time disappeared, and he gained nothing. He needed mental health care, but there wasn’t any. That’s where we’re at”.

Vera, a combination class teacher in another school, described teachers drawing boundaries around the extent to which they would go to support newcomers:

“We go pretty far in supporting our students. We call them up at night, call and wake them up in the morning... [...] We’ve sometimes accompanied them to a psychologist, for instance, because the student is insecure and doesn’t want to go alone. And then – ‘Can you come?’. ‘Yes’. We’ve accompanied them to doctors’ appointments too when the student doesn’t want to go. They’re scared to go and there’s no one they have more confidence in than us. So it happens. But it’s also been the case where the student’s problems were so serious that we’ve had to tell our colleagues, ‘You have to leave the phone outside your bedroom. Don’t pick up after 7 pm because it’s bad for you’. That’s happened too”.

While in the UK, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland all have government-funded school counselling services, England does not. Teachers in the English school describing feeling ill-equipped to deal with their students’ mental health needs:

Hamza: It’s sometimes difficult for us to have these conversations because we feel like, how do you approach it, you know. I might break down myself in front of the child, do you get it?

Kate: We’re not counsellors. We. Are. Not. Counsellors.

Hamza: Yeah, yeah that’s exactly what the problem is.

Ana: I think we should get training, though. If we’re expected to have these roles, then we should be trained as counsellors or have some kind of counselling experience because otherwise we’re just expected to do some kind of miracle... [agreement].

Hamza: We’re probably not doing it right, to be honest.

Kate: No, we have no idea if we are doing it right.

Exam preparation

In Norway, Vera, a combination class teacher, observed,

“Our students have the exact same syllabus as Norwegian students have. The competence targets are exactly the same, but the Norwegian students have ten years to achieve this, in their mother tongue. Our students have one, two, maybe three years. Come exam day, they cannot rely on us to understand the assignment. In Maths, for example, there are lots of textual assignments, and they’re expected to solve them in the same way, meeting the same assessment criteria, no extra time, nothing. It’s exactly the same. And that’s the fairness principle for you! The equality principle in Norwegian schools is a real challenge for our students!”.

Ingrid, another combination class teacher in the same school, complained that mainstream class teachers (who would be teaching newcomers the following year) had no appreciation for newcomers’ particular needs and abilities:

“I hear some [mainstream] teachers, in some subjects, who really do not understand and appreciate the magnitude of the problems they have, academically and with the language – they’ll just say, ‘But they *must* understand. God, of course they’ll just have to understand! Nothing for *us* to worry about!’. There is just no appreciation of how difficult it is to learn a new language and that that’s why the students don’t understand the assignments. It’s not because they’re stupid. They don’t understand the assignments because they don’t understand the words, the language!”

Anders, who was also a combination class teacher, reflected,

“In the group that I teach, in English, most have very little previous schooling, have had no English teaching before, and

they're supposed to enter the exam at Module Four level. In reality we're working at Module Two level, 'cos that's where we are. And then the exam will just have to ... it'll be as it'll be. If we can get them up to the 'second' [the lowest grade level needed to pass], I'll be thrilled. That's my goal. It's something I just have to accept, that's just how it is." [agreement].

Introduction class teachers at another Norwegian school similarly observed that some newcomer students were not literate and described how this influenced their teaching practices:

Hilde: Some ... are illiterate. Not like regular youth at school who have learned how to go to school. Many of them haven't – they're not *skolske* ["schoolish"]. So that's where many of them have to start, like, "Here's the bag, here are my pencils...". They lack a system for what they're doing. [...].

Erik: That's the challenge we have, it is a real challenge to *realitetsorientere* ["reality-orient"] them to our school system. To make them- they are in such a rush, and we fully understand that they want to move on quickly, but they think that they just need to read a bit more or just [transfer to the mainstream class]. That's when we have to come in and be a little brutal sometimes, and explain to them time and time again that, if you fail your upper secondary exams, you'll have to do it all over again on your own and without a teacher, and ... At least, it's my experience that it takes unbelievably long for them to understand this. And the goal and the hope is that they do "get it" before it's too late.

In state-funded education in the UK, when students reach GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) level the schools themselves receive a "grade" based on the exam results of students who hold "Key Stage 2" data from primary school.¹ This grade is published in national league tables and has implications for school budgets, including teaching salaries. Ana highlighted the impact of this system on teaching practices:

"There's a lot of kids who kind of fall through the cracks because – especially if they come later on in terms of their academic kind of journey at school, like if they come in Year 10, Year 11, we're having to focus basically exclusively on GCSEs ... It's another symptom of the problem of having, like, these terminal exams that mean everything for schools, budgeting and funding and ... for the teachers' own appraisals as well. Because, like, if you've got a class, for example, my Year 10 Set 5 [the lowest set], where like only like three or four of them have Key Stage 2 results, like only those three or four students actually count towards the data and the progress scores for the school. So that means that you've got like ... like however many kids, like 25 or something, who don't actually count towards any data. So it's like actually, what you're encouraging is for teachers to not pay attention to those kids and to completely ignore them and just focus on the ones who actually do have prior data and make sure that they get the grades. And

I obviously don't do that because, you know, you want everyone to have a chance. But it's like, yeah, I guess it's really – it's really difficult for those kids".

Ana added,

'I remember recently one of my Year 10s was like, 'Oh, yeah, I'm going to be a doctor'. And you just think, like, you know, you're not – that's not going to happen for you ... because you've come to this so late. And now you're going to have to try and compete with kids who have been here their entire lives. And it's just not going to happen.'

Discussion

The findings of our study give rich insight into teachers' perceptions and experiences of teaching newcomers in Norway and England. They expose a significant gap between education structures and the *de facto* situation confronted by teachers in the classroom when they attempt to integrate newcomers, care for their pastoral needs, and prepare them for exams. They show how teachers in each country engage in their own politics of recognition at school.

Differentiating practices

In England, a universalist approach towards newcomer education prevails. Schools do not receive official information on the migration status of their students. McIntyre and Hall (2018) have previously shown how headteachers at English schools deal with this absence of information in their attempts to include newcomers at school; our study shows how teachers respond in the classroom. Sharon responds to a lack of information about her students' migration status through a politics of difference: she chooses not to seek clarification, but rather relies on essentialised notions of refugee children as being "a certain way" in order to "identify" them as such. For Sharon, this "strategic categorisation" (Watters, 2001, 2008) is necessary in order to help newcomers progress in the absence of policy recognition. As Watters (2008:129) contends, service providers are "not necessarily mere functionaries operating within a hegemonic discourse, but actors who may engage strategically to further refugees' aspirations in sophisticated ways".

In both England and Norway, teachers feel that it is important to provide tailored instruction, including for newly arrived children with no or low levels of education. Yet in both countries, teachers struggle to meet this objective. In England, Ana reports that her ability to differentiate between students is limited in practice by budgetary and time constraints. According to Hamilton (2013:184), "Increased demands on teachers' time, in a performance-driven culture, may make the task of providing the in-depth and individualised support often required by migrant children too demanding for some practitioners". Ana's description of the situation as hugely challenging is echoed by Ingrid in Norway, who characterises her combination class as "insanely diverse". Her words echo Hilt's (2017:591) finding that Norwegian teachers perceive the task of teaching mixed ability

¹ 'Key Stage 2' refers to the four years of schooling in maintained schools from Year 3 to Year 6, when students are between 7 and 11 years old.

groups of newcomers as “absurd”. There is a clear discrepancy between the right to tailored instruction, enshrined in the Norwegian Education Act, and the ability of teachers to realise these rights within the “combination” class format in Norwegian schools. Teachers in both countries are evidently unequipped to recognise diverse needs and abilities in the classroom, leading to what [Tatar and Horenczyk \(2003\)](#) describe as “diversity-related burnout”.

Recognising needs

Our study illuminates the processes of recognition at play when teachers attempt to secure their students’ wellbeing at school. In Norway, Vera suggests that teachers have become a primary source of trust and “confidence” for newcomers, echoing [McDiarmid et al.’s \(2022:7\)](#) finding that teachers in Sweden perceive themselves to be “often the most consistently present adult in the [newcomer] youth’s life and frequently take on a parental role. By demonstrating a genuine interest and care for the students they build trust and are often the person youth turn to for advice or to share their feelings”. Mari describes recognition, including even simple greetings (“Hi!”), as central to her relationship with newcomer students. As [Kauhanen and Kauko \(2020\)](#) find of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, their essential needs include the need to be heard and seen as unique persons, i.e., to be “recognised”. Mari insists that recognising these needs in her teaching practices with newcomers is “just natural”.

Other teachers in Norway point to a lack of external support for newcomers’ pastoral needs, as previous studies have also found in Norway ([Pastoor, 2015; Norozi, 2019; Brook and Ottemöller, 2020](#)). These teachers suggest that in the absence of mental health support structures, newcomers with mental health needs “gain nothing” at school, echoing studies which find an inverse relationship between mental health problems and academic achievement ([Fletcher, 2010; Esch et al., 2014; Halpern-Manners et al., 2016](#)). At the same time, they draw boundaries around their roles, noting that while they “go pretty far” in supporting newcomers practically, failing to put limits on these pastoral practices is “bad for you” (also see [Hägström et al., 2020](#)). Similarly, teachers in England insist that in contrast to government expectations, they cannot do “some kind of miracle”. As [Pastoor \(2015:252\)](#) reports of teachers of unaccompanied refugee youth in Norway, “most teachers neither have sufficient knowledge nor competence regarding the psychological problems their learners struggle with”. The teachers in England reluctantly play the role of “counsellor” but, unlike Mari in Norway, refuse to accept being naturalised as such in the absence of policy recognition for newcomers’ mental health needs – “We. Are. Not. Counsellors”.

Lowering expectations

[McIntyre and Hall \(2018:3\)](#) note that education systems in the global North are now characterised by “an economically influenced model of schooling marked by standardisation of education outcomes”. Teachers in our study suggest that other teachers reproduce this politics of universalism in the classroom: in Norway, combination class teachers report that mainstream class teachers fail to recognise newcomer needs and abilities; in England, Ana describes how other teachers, beholden to the marketised education system, strategically

ignore newcomers in their teaching practices. She highlights her own practices as the exception to this role: rather than ignore newcomers she works to “pay attention” to them and recognise their value in the classroom. At the same time, she implicitly suggests that even these differentiating practices are no match for homogenising education structures – “it’s just not going to happen”. In her view, the chances of success for older newcomers are self-evidently nil within the high-stakes education system.

Teachers in Norway lament the paradoxically unfair effects on newcomers of the “fairness” or “equality” principle in the Norwegian education system. They respond by lowering their expectations of newcomer students, corroborating reports from young refugees that their teachers hold lower expectations for them ([Guo et al., 2019; Osman et al., 2020](#)). Our study demonstrates how these lower expectations do not emerge from a vacuum but rather are deeply embedded in universalising education structures. Teachers in Norway do not simply hold these lowered expectations but enact them *upon* newcomers, articulated in Erik’s use of the verb “reality-orient”. In his view, students must have their expectations adjusted by their teachers. These attitudes in the context of a universalist education system are not atypical: [Hägström et al. \(2020\)](#), for example, report that preparatory class teachers in Sweden would prefer to keep newcomer learners in their classes for longer. Teachers in [Bunar and Juvonen’s \(2022:990\)](#) research in Sweden characterise newcomer students as “not yet ready” to enter mainstream education and describe the concomitant imperative to “keep them here”. While Erik appears to recognise, like [Bunar and Juvonen \(2022\)](#), that the process of holding newcomers back denies newcomers their agency (he describes it as “brutal”), he nevertheless regards it as necessary – the only strategy he deems to have potential in the universalist education system.

Conclusion

Education systems in Norway and England are characterised by a universalist politics of recognition which fails to recognise the newcomer in various ways. This is evidenced in an absence of structures, resources, and tools either to encourage differentiated teaching practices, or to support newcomer wellbeing through appropriate social care or mental health policies. A universalist politics is also clearly seen in standardising education policies which do not recognise newcomer needs and abilities and which disincentivise teachers from doing so in the classroom. Our findings highlight teachers’ significant agency in responding to this universalism through a politics of difference, sometimes at a cost to their own wellbeing. This politics can involve teachers adopting essentialist notions of the “refugee” child, and naturalising the teaching role as inherently pastoral. Both strategies threaten to obscure the need to recognise the newcomer in education and social care policy. Other teachers place limits on this politics of recognition, drawing boundaries around their pastoral practices in the absence of external support, and lowering their own and their students’ expectations in the face of standardising policies.

Several policy implications emerge from our study. The findings point to the exclusionary effects of universalist education policies, suggesting the need for education systems which recognise and respond to the needs and abilities of the newcomer and which support teachers to do so in the classroom ([Pinson and Arnot,](#)

2010). At the same time, education policies must avoid “othering” the newcomer by encouraging an overarching ethos of inclusion and individualised approaches (Pinson et al., 2010; Taylor and Sidhu, 2012). While teachers are well-placed to respond to the pastoral needs of newcomers, their teaching practices should enhance rather than replace external support structures, e.g., in social care policy (Hägström et al., 2020). Finally, there is an obvious need for further research to explore the politics of recognition in education from the perspectives of young newcomers. How – and to what effect – do they feel their needs and abilities to be recognised (or not) in the classroom? Such research should foreground young people’s agency as individuals, capable of strategising to further their own aspirations. At the same time, it must emphasise the ultimate responsibility of education systems to ensure every child’s right to recognition at school.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because The data is not publicly available. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to University of Sussex.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Social Sciences & Arts Cross-Schools Research Ethics Committee, University of Sussex, England; Regional Committees for Medical Research Ethics, Norway. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the

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The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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