Dilemmas in Reception of Newly Arrived Migrant Students: A Local Third Way?

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ABSTRACT
Receiving newly arrived migrant pupils poses a dilemma in terms of what special provisions they should have in schools. In Denmark, the dilemma is deferred to municipalities. In Aalborg Municipality, the two dominating approaches, direct enrollment and reception classes, were recontextualized into a third way mixed reception approach in 2022. Through classroom observations and interviews, this article asks: How does school staff handle reception when the two dominating reception approaches are politically transformed into a new mixed approach? The article shows that the dominating approaches affect the division between specialized teachers' and mainstream teachers' handling and understanding of reception.

Keywords: migrant education, reception approach, newly arrived migrant pupils, Danish welfare state, decentralization

Introduction
In Denmark, both the education system and integration policy have long been characterized by decentralization (Jørgensen, 2014; Moos, 2013; Reder & Ydesen, 2022). Education reforms in the 1970s delegated responsibility for public schools to municipalities (de Coninck-Smith et al., 2015, p. 55), while the very first Integration Act in 1999 similarly deferred responsibility for migrant people (Breidahl, 2017). Hence, the Danish welfare state’s municipalities still maintain discretion in their handling of newly arrived migrant students, who have both migrant status and the right to...
schooling. This article describes how the reception of newly arrived migrant students in Danish public schools poses a dilemma to be handled through the discretion given to the local municipality and its schools. The dilemma became politically salient yet again upon the arrival of Ukrainian refugees in the wake of the Russian invasion in February 2022. Presuming record numbers of newly arrived migrant students, then Danish Minister of Education Pernille Rosenkrantz-Theil (Social Democrats), on the one hand, emphasized students’ need to return to life as usual by quickly entering the mainstream classroom (Bjerril & Trier, 2022). On the other hand, as numbers were adjusted to be higher than originally anticipated, Rosenkrantz-Theil instead argued that separate classes for the newly arrived migrant students would most likely be the best course of action (Bjerril & Trier, 2022; Lyall, 2022). Alternating between emphasizing inclusion in the mainstream classroom and special provisions through separate classes, she nevertheless reiterated that these decisions were up to the municipalities, which have autonomy over choosing the type of reception students should encounter. While debates intertwining migration and schooling thus occur at the national level, Rosenkrantz-Theil followed the decentralizing policy of former Danish Ministers of Education (Enemark & Buchardt, 2023).

This is emblematic of attempts to solve the larger dilemma in relation to migrant people in Denmark, namely by means of decentralization. Denmark is a universal welfare state, yet simultaneously has restrictive national immigration and integration policies (Mouritsen & Olsen, 2013). Hence, there is a recurring conflict between an equality-emphasizing “welfare state mentality” (Buchardt et al., 2013; Kettunen & Petersen, 2011; Mouritsen & Olsen, 2013), and what Suszycki (2011) calls “welfare nationalism.” This conflict, however, rarely achieves a balance, becoming settled at the national level. Jørgensen argues that decentralizing tendencies within integration policy are a deliberate policy objective on the national level, to divert responsibility for the contested policy area to the local level (Jørgensen, 2012; Breidahl & Brodkin, 2023). For municipalities to interpret national policy on reception, and transform it into concrete pedagogical procedures at schools, they must look to ways of organizing the reception of newly arrived migrant students. While a multitude of reception approaches have historically been developed locally (Enemark & Buchardt, 2023), scholarship on reception approaches discerns between two main approaches in a European context (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, Eurydice, 2017, p. 18), namely the reception class approach\(^1\) and the direct enrollment approach\(^2\). While there is limited contemporary literature on reception approaches in a Danish context (Moldenhawer, 2017; Rambøll, 2015, 2017), most municipalities in 2017 reported using one of the two (Styrelsen for Undervisning og Kvalitet, 2017). These two approaches also dominate reception approach portrayals in the mainstream media (Bjerril & Trier, 2022), including the Danish Union of Teachers’ journal *Folkeskolen* (Møller, 2019, \\

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\(^1\) Also referred to as preparatory classes, welcome classes, or introductory classes.

\(^2\) Also referred to as mainstreaming, direct-integration, or direct inclusion.
This article therefore seeks to shed light on what Nilsson and Bunar (2016) have called the rise of the “mixed” reception approach by asking: How does school staff handle the reception of newly arrived migrant students when the two dominant reception approaches are politically transformed into a new mixed approach?

This article thus explores how the dominant reception approaches, i.e., reception classes and direct enrollment, and the politicized debates surrounding them have been transformed in Aalborg Municipality into a seemingly third way mixed approach, and how this plays out in schools in the municipality. It aims to contribute to scholarship on the development and transformation of reception approaches in a decentralized context, not unlike the situation in other European education systems (Rydin et al., 2011). It also questions what happens when dominating approaches are mixed, and how these dominating approaches show up in school staff’s handling of a mixed approach. The article is structured by an initial description of the dominating reception approaches and the discourses underpinning them. The theoretical framework applied and methods used will then be explained, followed by a two-part analysis concluded by a discussion.

The dominant reception approaches
The following section accounts for the dominating approaches and briefly describes their use in a Danish context. The dominant reception approaches are a result of knowledge production including national comparative policy analyses, where there appears to be a European – and particularly Scandinavian – consensus on their predominance.

The reception class approach entails placing students in a separate classroom with other students who are new to speaking Danish. The intention is to have a gradual transition into the mainstream classroom once the level of Danish is sufficient to participate. Hence, reception classes are considered a “soft landing” for students, where they are not overwhelmed by being in a mainstream classroom. In this way, these classes offer a sense of belonging and safety for students (Borsch et al., 2021; Erling et al., 2021; Gitschthaler et al., 2021; Li & Buchardt, 2022; Nilsson & Axelsson, 2013). Yet, the nature of reception classes, entailing separation from the mainstream classes, means they are criticized as being inherently segregating (Bunar & Juvonen, 2021; Crul et al., 2019). Furthermore, because these classes are temporary, with the objective of language learning, there is concern that students might not receive vital learning in other subjects (Erling et al., 2021; Nilsson & Bunar, 2016). As students have already made the transition between national school systems, there are also concerns that the second transition, into mainstream classrooms, means students risk encountering social and academic difficulties in being placed in yet another new context (Nilsson & Axelsson, 2013; Nilsson & Bunar, 2016). The arguments in favor of reception classes are therefore based mainly on providing a solid language foundation and calm beginning. The opposition criticize the, perhaps, too great focus on language learning at the expense of other subjects, students having to transition to a new environment a
second time, as well as the inherently segregating nature of separate classes for newly arrived migrant students.

The segregating nature of the reception class approach is mitigated through the other dominant approach, namely the direct enrollment approach. Previous studies have indicated students are eager to transition to the mainstream classroom (see Nilsson & Axelsson, 2013), and direct enrollment caters to that by placing students in the mainstream classroom from day one, with supplementary language lessons outside the classroom. Newly arrived migrant students are hence surrounded by, in the context of this article, Danish speakers, thus being submersed in the Danish language. While the approach formally offers inclusion, being placed in a mainstream classroom without necessarily being able to participate can also be construed as exclusion (Zembylas, 2011). This caveat is exacerbated by teachers in mainstream classrooms often feeling ill-prepared to teach newly arrived migrant students (Emery et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2022; Zembylas, 2011). Hence, the specialized schooling in reception classes is often preferred by mainstream teachers, who find it overwhelming that newly arrived migrant students are present immediately upon arrival in their classroom (Gitschthaler et al., 2021; Nilsson & Bunar, 2016; Rodríguez-Izquierdo & Darmody, 2017; Tajic & Bunar, 2020). Due to the complex situation faced by the mainstream teachers, combined with exclusion through the formal inclusion of students, it is therefore difficult to find support in the academic literature for direct enrollment as an approach (Crul et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2022; Zembylas, 2011). Nevertheless, sympathetic notions of inclusion in the mainstream classes have contributed to the approach gaining popularity.

Historically, the reception class approach has officially dominated in Denmark, since the policy framework was formulated in 1976 (Buchardt, 2016), although there are documented instances of municipalities opting to use the direct enrollment approach as early as the 1970s (Li & Buchardt, 2022). The national policy framework remains largely the same nearly 50 years on and offers reception classes as one of the ways of organizing reception. However, the municipalities have discretionary room to select other approaches. In 2016, following what has been described as “the European refugee crisis” (Buchardt, 2018), there was an apparent change in Denmark, when most municipalities adopted the direct enrollment approach (Styrelsen for Undervisning og Kvalitet, 2017). Both the use of the reception class approach and the direct enrollment approach have entailed inspiration from other national contexts or knowledge production (Enemark et al., 2022; Skiveren et al., 2024). In the case of Aalborg, the municipality’s 2022 reception approach differs from the two dominant approaches in the length of their introduction program. While the reception class approach typically has longer 1–2-year stays in the separate class, direct enrollment typically offers only a few hours a day or week. The Aalborg Municipality 2022 reception approach offers a briefer 3–6–month introduction program in a reception class, followed by enrollment in the mainstream classroom with intermittent supplementary reception lessons. The municipality previously used a reception class approach (pre–2017) and later a direct
enrollment approach (2017–2022), and staff therefore intermittently rely on professional knowledge they gained during the previous approaches.

**Theoretical and methodological underpinnings**

The article focuses on a transformation of the dominant reception approaches, which poses a dilemma for how municipalities and schools should organize their reception of newly arrived migrant students. This section describes how the article utilizes interviews and observations, while drawing on a theoretical framework emphasizing knowledge, and how those working directly with students handle conflicting demands. School staff are aware of the dilemma of choosing between special provisions and mainstream schooling that the approaches represent, and it is how they navigate this dilemma and which discourses and logic they rely on that I seek to investigate.

The case of the 2022 alternative reception approach at schools in Aalborg Municipality is explored in this article through interviews and observations. In combining concepts from, respectively, Basil Bernstein and Michael Lipsky, the paper focuses on how specialized teachers with expertise in newly arrived migrant students, and mainstream teachers without this expertise, handle local reception politics, namely how it is recontextualized (Bernstein, 2003). Combined, such an analytical lens focuses attention on their understanding, as well as on the constraints and opportunities for action that school staff encounter, and what logic they rely on to navigate reception approach transformation.

**Theoretical underpinnings**

Street-level scholar Evelyn Brodkin uses Paul Pierson’s work to argue that policy is rarely a neatly packaged full recipe for action but should instead be thought of as indeterminate (Brodkin, 2013; Pierson, 1997). Those with policy in their hands, who deliver concrete services to the public, hence transform it through their discretionary judgment. With policy in their hands, pedagogical staff proverbially mold it, and add their professional knowledge to it as they act. Recontextualization is a concept from the vast theoretical body of work of Basil Bernstein, the sociologist of education and knowledge, which in this article is useful for understanding the transformation of reception approaches. Bernstein paid special attention to knowledge, and how knowledge is changed and transformed as it engages with the logic of the pedagogical field. As pointed out by Singh et al. (2013), recontextualization aids in exploring the dilemmas and conflicting demands agents in the pedagogical field must navigate. How they navigate these dilemmas orders how reception approaches can unfold, including what can legitimately be done and thought. Bernstein describes two crucial transformations, which can be inferred with regard to reception approach recontextualization. The first is an initial selective appropriation of knowledge from where it originates (the field of

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3 All interviewed school staff mentioned either one or both previous approaches in their interviews.
production) to those tasked with merging it with policy and procedures at the national or municipal level. The subsequent transformation, on which this paper is centered, directs attention to how the already altered reception approach is transformed and pedagogized in schools (Bernstein, 2003). Thus, the focus in this paper is exclusively on the school level, as opposed to the national level (Enemark, 2023) or the municipal level (Enemark, 2024). Combined with street-level theory from Michael Lipsky (Lipsky, 2010), emphasis is therefore on which constraints and conceptualizations of their job impact how reception approaches are handled and molded in the hands of pedagogical staff, working at the frontlines of the Danish welfare state responsible for the schooling of newly arrived migrant students.

Methodological underpinnings
To explore how school staff manage reception in Aalborg Municipality, the article therefore draws on structured classroom observations where relevant instances – such as use of translation technology, placing the student outside the classroom or with different materials – have been noted in frequency tables (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). To supplement the frequency tallies, supplementary observation notes were also included. Here, relevant context is noted, and critical events are described (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). Lastly, interviews conducted with mainstream and specialized teachers have been used. The interviews took place before and after the observations, and focused on having teachers explain their logic for how they handle reception, and were in this sense rather structured (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The observations and interviews were conducted in two rounds in the fall/winter of 2021 and in the winter/spring of 2022 at two different schools in Aalborg Municipality. This empirical material is based on a total of 19 structured observation days, and 10 structured interviews with school staff (Brönnimann, 2022; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). While not focusing specifically on the students’ perspectives and voices, what the students expressed in the observations was used in interviews with school staff as examples for them to discuss the staff’s actions and logic. The school staff working at the frontlines with newly arrived migrant students are predominantly specialized teachers and mainstream teachers. The former are specialized in Danish as a second language, while the latter focus on specific subjects (such as art or chemistry). This article is therefore concerned with how approaches are a site of reception politics, since specialized and mainstream teachers directly handle the newly arrived migrant students’ schooling. Because of their different jobs, specialized teachers and mainstream teachers may construe reception in certain ways in their day-to-day life, between the constraints of their specific job titles, their training or education, and their idea of what reception entails.

The extracts from observations and interviews throughout the analysis will remain focused on one illustrative school, and how two newly arrived migrant students were received by staff. This allows visibility of the empirical material, and focusing on one school aims to not add unnecessary complexity. The two male students that the
school staff handled are given the pseudonyms of Eduardo and Ruben. The illustrative school is comparable to the other school, as both have specialized teachers specifically handling language learning (in the additional lessons and introduction program) and mainstream teachers (who receive them in the classroom upon enrollment or take over after the introduction program). The introduction program is placed at the illustrative school, and it therefore has a greater number of newly arrived migrant students and specialized teachers. Eduardo and Ruben are two of a total of four newly arrived migrant students whose teachers I focused on (all of them newly arrived 10- or 11-year-old non-refugee boys).

Applying the theoretical framework leads to an analysis of how the dominating reception approaches are recontextualized at schools, and (potentially) order how teachers handle the politics of reception of newly arrived migrant students. The interviews and observations have been thematically coded through Nvivo, as they relate to reception classes or direct enrollment (or neither). By focusing on the dilemmas inherent in the dominant reception approaches, the constraints and opportunities for school staff are highlighted, as they must balance these. Furthermore, to structure the analysis (Fletcher, 2016), thematic aspects divided by reception approaches have been noted, which resulted in the two forthcoming analytical parts: receiving students through an introduction program and receiving students through the mainstream classroom.

Ethical considerations
During the collection, analysis, and write-up of the material, ethical considerations have been made. First, all informants and named persons in the material have been either anonymized or pseudonymized, in line with both the Danish Code of Conduct on Research Integrity and Danish data protection legislation. All raw empirical material is stored on Aalborg University’s separate two-factor validation servers, including the analyzed data in Nvivo. Second, all teachers have consented to the observations and interviews, and been made aware of the focus of the study (newly arrived migrant students in the classroom). To not single out newly arrived migrant students, all parents and students have been informed of my presence in the classroom. My conduct during the classroom observations has revolved around remaining open to students’ inquiries (for instance, to see my notes or aid with tasks), but otherwise I remain seated facing the teacher, so as to be in the classroom in a way similar to students. This also means I have observed classes outside the scope of this study (for example, where the newly

4 During the selection process, I discarded students aged 13 or above, as there is a separate program for this group in the municipality. Furthermore, other municipalities have other approaches to students in the early years (grades 0 to 3), so I selected students from the middle years (grades 4 to 6). Because of variations in the asylum process in Denmark (and the subsequent schooling offered), I have moreover opted to explore exclusively non-refugee migrant students.

5 Until 31 December 2025, when the empirical material will be erased.
arrived migrant students were not present) to ensure students felt included during my presence without singling specific students out.

**Analysis**

The two dominant approaches, a reception class and direct enrollment, pose a dilemma to municipalities, as well as representing two broader discourses on whether students should receive special provisions, or be included in the mainstream classroom (Enemark et al., 2022). This section therefore explores how Aalborg Municipality mitigates this dilemma by drawing on both approaches. This entails how reception unfolds through not only specialized staff, but also through the mainstream teachers.

**Receiving students through an introduction program**

Whether students are placed in the introduction program or directly in the mainstream classroom through the municipality’s previous direct enrollment approach, the structured observations show that teachers rely on similar resources. English as the intermediate language and translation technology feature prominently in the introduction program, as well as outside of it. Nevertheless, the introduction program has more intensive Danish language learning in classrooms with fewer students, than mainstream classes. The specialized teachers, in charge of the introduction program, find this initial reception useful, but emphasize that their professional knowledge indicates six months in the introduction program, as a rule of thumb, is appropriate. A specialized teacher reflects:

> I do not think the student will get better linguistically by staying in the introduction program. And that is also because I have experiences from back when we had 2-year reception classes, and well, it was exactly after six months that by far the most stagnated ... Well, it takes many years to learn the academic part of a language. But I do not think it will come about faster by being in a reception class.

*(Interview with specialized teacher, School A, May 2023)*

While the specialized teacher above is concerned with the linguistic foundation the introduction program offers, the mainstream teachers are more concerned with what they deem necessary in order to participate in a mainstream classroom. One mainstream teacher ascribes this mainly to school culture:

**Author:** Is it nicer for you as a teacher to get the students when they've been in the introduction program for six months?

**Teacher:** Well yeah, I kind of think so, because what I have done, I mean I don't know how much I have done for their language learning, I can't really assess that, because I did not know them when they had just gotten here. But I definitely think that (the introduction
program] has done something. But also, that they have gotten to
know Danish culture in a different way. They have gotten to know
the Danish school system in a way. All the things that I can’t give
them … they bring it [from the introduction program], so then it is
not a job for me, they already know it. But [Eduardo and Ruben] are
extremely intelligent boys, both of them, and quick to learn. So, it is
not difficult.

(Interview with mainstream teacher, School A, May 2023)

The mainstream teacher is less concerned with linguistic development as she deems
Eduardo and Ruben to be intelligent and quick learners. For her as a teacher, juggling
a classroom with a higher number of students, she is more concerned with formal
behavior in the classroom. Learning to be a student ready for the mainstream class-
room entails knowing how to behave, especially socially. The teachers go back and
forth in their reflections about the introduction program, between the language learn-
ing component and the social development of students. During the observations, some
students in the introduction program appeared socially disconnected from the other
students at the school, namely those in the mainstream section. A specialized teacher
called attention to this and argued how this was a consideration regarding the length
of the introduction program:

Teacher: I would not want another approach, but I could wish for more
resources for the supplementary part, to give them a hand out there.
And the counterculture that can also emerge by being in an intro-
duction program, and finding a community in that, I am afraid that
might be too much if you make longer programs than six months,
actually.

(Interview with specialized teacher, School A, May 2023)

The counterculture she talks of reveals concern for the social segregation of students
who are newly arrived and enter the introduction program, and students in the main-
stream section. The specialized teachers in the introduction program and the stu-
dents’ future mainstream teachers intermittently discuss the social situation of the
newly arrived migrant students. Some of these students are quite vocal about their
disregard for the introduction program, after they have begun having a few lessons in
their mainstream class. This was also the case for Eduardo and Ruben when I had the
following interaction with them:

It is cleaning day at the school. Eduardo and Ruben have already been cleaning for the
first half of the day with their mainstream class. They are now in the introduction pro-
gram, where they have been informed they must clean again. They protest and argue
they should not suffer twice. They agree to take out the trash. I ask if I can join. They
moan about the unfairness on the way to the garbage can. They agree they would
much rather be in their mainstream class.
Author, speaking in English: Why did you say you’d rather be in [the mainstream class]?
Ruben, speaking in English: Because we actually have friends there.
Eduardo, speaking in English: And it’s not a bunch of 5-year-olds. And then we don’t have to clean twice.

(Observation, School A, March 1, 2023, Lesson 3)

Eduardo and Ruben are likely referring to the wide age range of the introduction program, which at the time had students from grades 2 through 6. The students clearly express dissatisfaction with being in the introduction program, and express a stronger affiliation to their mainstream classroom. Similar statements were made upon their return to the introduction program classroom. Less than an hour after the above interaction, the specialized teacher stepped out of the introduction program classroom and disappeared for a few minutes. When the specialized teacher returned, she was accompanied by Eduardo and Ruben’s mainstream teacher:

Mainstream teacher comes into the reception classroom.
Mainstream teacher speaking in English: How much do you like me?
Eduardo [ecstatic], speaking in English: A LOT!
Mainstream teacher, speaking in English: From next week, you’ll be in English with us on Wednesdays.

(Observation, School A, March 1, 2023, Lesson 4)

This change in Eduardo and Ruben’s schedule indicates that the specialized teacher talked to the mainstream teacher about their dissatisfaction with being in the introduction program. They must have decided that a solution was to extend Eduardo and Ruben’s affiliation with the mainstream classroom by enrolling them in another subject. The introduction program is hence flexible in the sense that, upon a quick discussion, teachers can alter the structure. While six months in the introduction program is emphasized as offering the linguistic foundation students need, this is negotiable in the 2022 reception approach. Indeed, Eduardo and Ruben’s dissatisfaction was accommodated, since the specific mainstream teacher they have in a few subjects agreed to speed up some of this transition, in spite of the fact that this increased the number of students in her classroom in those lessons.

In terms of the introduction program and the transition to the mainstream classroom, the specialized teachers presume that newly arrived migrant students need six months in the introduction program. Yet, individual assessment is conducted informally, and mainstream teachers have an influence on co-assessing if students are ready for the mainstream classroom. They are likely to assess the students as ready:

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6 Where relevant, the language spoken in the extract has been noted (translation by author).
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if they are motivated to be in their mainstream classroom; if they are perceived as intelligent; and if they have been “culturally adjusted” to Danish education culture. Mainstream teachers do still favor an initial reception outside the mainstream classroom, but argue more confidently for this as a need for a cultural foundation.

Receiving students through the mainstream classroom

In the mainstream classroom, teachers must ensure a successful continued reception of newly arrived migrant students, while simultaneously handling the other students. As previously noted in literature, mainstream teachers have reported feeling ill-prepared to receive newly arrived migrant students, and therefore argue in favor of reception classes to offer specialized schooling. Once they encounter the problem of having newly arrived migrant students in the mainstream classroom, they opt to use different measures to make it work. These include using translation technologies, and English as an intermediate language, trying to ensure the newly arrived migrant students fare well socially. They also rely on other students to take responsibility for their new classmates.

Across the observation rounds from prior to and after the 2022 reception approach, there are no changes as to how often mainstream teachers utilize translation technology, English as an intermediate language, differentiated materials, or allowing/suggesting the student should leave the classroom for other activities. This occurs in nearly all sampled lessons, which suggests a general trend as to how reception is conducted in the mainstream classroom. It also suggests that differentiation is crucial to reception in the mainstream classroom, regardless of whether or not students had an introductory program emphasizing Danish language learning. In their reception, teachers hence rely extensively on premade materials or adjusting their material to the new student, as well as using technology and English as an intermediate language to communicate efficiently. To achieve Danish language learning inside the mainstream classroom, discourses related to direct enrollment appear to be at play. Teachers in mainstream classrooms use social arguments about cohesion and belonging to the class as necessary to achieve a successful reception. One mainstream teacher recalled the reasoning for including two newly arrived migrant students in her class, specifically, as follows:

Initially, we placed Eduardo and Ruben in separate classes, and then we had to find a space for [another newly arrived migrant student]. But at that time, Eduardo and Ruben enjoyed each other’s company ... and that is why I chose to put them together, I took both Eduardo and Ruben, and then the other class got [the other newly arrived migrant student].

(Interview with mainstream teacher, School A, May 2023)

As the teacher argues, the social comfort of newly arrived migrant students is favored. She has the discretion to influence the composition of her class, and she actively used her knowledge of the students’ social engagement to assess that Eduardo and Ruben should be kept together, and hence ended up taking both. It suggests further how the
perception of a successful reception is tied to the social mix, and depends on social inclusion, both to accept the pretty quick enrollment and to sustain it. This can be partly explained by how using English as an intermediate language eases the teachers’ work and allows students to aid each other. In a busy lesson, the following interaction between a student, Sofia, and a teacher occurred:

Ruben, speaking in English: [Teacher], I found a book in English. But how do I borrow it?
Teacher, speaking in Danish: Sofia, do you have the time to help?
Sofia: (Nods and leaves with Ruben)

(School A, Round 3, Day 2, Lesson 2)

Here, the teacher actively reached out to the nearest student to help the newly arrived migrant student borrow a library book, effortlessly switching between English to Ruben, and Danish to Sofia. Delegating tasks to students is a way for teachers to manage the otherwise plethora of minor questions and issues inevitably arising during their initial time in the mainstream classroom. While the mainstream teacher is responsible for the student, they can use discretion to delegate tasks. However, it is not only upon request that the students aid the newly arrived migrant students in the mainstream classroom. This also takes place, especially in the class’s group of boys, as seen with the student Liam:

The lesson is in the subject Knowledge of Christianity with a different mainstream teacher than their homeroom teacher.

Liam, speaking in Danish: Is it okay I read with Eduardo, because he doesn’t understand?
Teacher, speaking in English: Yeah. That’s okay.
Liam, speaking in Danish: Can we go in the hallway?
Teacher, speaking in Danish: Hmm. Yeah.

(School A, Round 3, Day 1, Lesson 3)

The other students quickly figured out that aiding their new classmates gave them opportunities to leave the mainstream classroom and sit in the hallway, something 4th and 5th graders seemed infatuated with. Students who needed a break therefore often offered to help. Yet while their secluded placement sometimes led to less school-related conversations, primarily in English, the teacher seemingly accepted this as the academic cost of social benefit. The helpfulness, of particularly the boy group in aiding Eduardo and Ruben, was noted by their homeroom teacher, since she stated that successful reception in the mainstream classroom “can depend on the boy group as well. My group of boys have risen to the occasion” (Interview with mainstream teacher, School A, May 2023).
In the mainstream classroom, there is both an explicit and implicit emphasis on social mixing between newly arrived migrant students and their classmates. This entails direct enrollment discourses, as social interactions are prioritized over academic development. English as an intermediate language among students is hesitantly accepted by teachers, though they also rely on English as an intermediate language for the other students to be able to help academically and engage socially.

**Discussion and concluding remarks**

This article has explored how school staff handle the reception of newly arrived migrant students, when national and municipal policy allow for discretion in handling the dilemma of choosing between mainstream schooling and special provisions. By illustrating how school staff use logic from and knowledge of the dominant reception approaches’ discourses in different ways, it highlights how the dominant approaches prominently feature in school staff’s differing perceptions of their tasks.

Mainstream teachers and specialized teachers have different ideas of what they deem a good and feasible reception. Mainstream teachers favor having students “ready” for mainstream classrooms where their behavior and cultural understanding have been attuned to their classroom. For them, students’ difficulties were partly explained in this article through culture (Buchardt, 2016; Jacobsen & Piekut, 2023). However, culture also appears in the arguments for solutions, namely that when students are “culturally prepared,” they can participate in the mainstream classroom. To ensure a successful reception, mainstream teachers enlist other students to aid in giving the student access to the class community, which is contingent on translation resources available, or the ability of most students to use English as an intermediate language. The use of English as an intermediate language poses potential issues for the students who do not speak English, whether their mother tongue is Danish and they are unable to communicate with their new classmate, or they are themselves newly arrived migrant students. Furthermore, submersion into the language environment, as direct enrollment ensures, appears to be of less importance compared with social submersion. In the complex situation of teaching a classroom of mainstream students with different needs, mainstream teachers emphasize class community and social mixing to be their task in the reception of newly arrived migrant students. Specialized teachers focus on language-learning and attempt to be attentive to at which point a student’s Danish language development stagnates. Hence, as opposed to the mainstream teachers, their emphasis is on Danish language learning, whereas the social belonging aspect of reception class discourses is not emphasized. Specialized teachers are, instead, also attuned to the importance of gaining access to the mainstream social community, and use collaboration with the newly arrived migrant student’s mainstream teacher to cater to the individual student’s needs. However, for this study, it should be kept in mind that the students followed were exclusively non-refugee
students. As noted by other studies, emphasizing access to the mainstream classroom requires sensitivity, especially to refugee students’ mental well-being (Erling et al., 2021; Gitschthaler et al., 2021). Iceland, for instance, offers different approaches to refugee students and migrant students (Gunnþórsdóttir & Ragnarsdóttir, 2020). Likewise, it should be noted that the students whose teachers’ handling I explored all spoke English well as an intermediate language, which enabled them to have a means to communicate efficiently with their surroundings.

Bunar and Juvonen argue that approaches aimed at newly arrived migrant students in the Swedish context “should be rebuilt on new bases” (Bunar & Juvonen, 2021, p. 17). Yet, the very dilemma between the dominant reception class and direct enrollment approaches, as shown in this article, mirrors how teachers think about reception. Merging knowledge of these approaches can also result in what Bunar and Juvonen recommend, namely that: “After a brief semi-integrated introductory period, [newly arrived migrant students] should be allowed after no more than a few months to enroll in mainstream programs, where their learning will continue” (Bunar & Juvonen, 2021, p. 17). Schools in Aalborg Municipality draw on both approaches. Halving the initial period of “landing” in the separate class is in accordance with the reception class approach, while a continued emphasis on the social mix stems from the direct enrollment approach. However, in keeping with Bunar and Juvonen’s suggestion, the dominance of reception classes and direct enrollment as approaches also poses the risk that other creative solutions to reception might be discarded (Enemark, 2024). As the dominant approaches and their discourses order what can be thought and done, their very dominance may hinder new experiments, such as those conducted, especially in the 1980s, in Denmark (Enemark & Buchardt, 2023). Here, “two-culture classes” with a heavier emphasis on students’ mother tongue were, for instance, used in Aalborg Municipality up until the 2010s. In this sense, the article has shown that the differences between national policy and local school practices, that many Scandinavian studies point out (Norberg, 2017; Norozi, 2019; Tajic & Bunar, 2020), should be explored, with attention to the degree of discretion and autonomy enjoyed by schools and other local bodies. Furthermore, mainstream teachers’ reluctance to have newly arrived migrant students in their mainstream classroom (Rodríguez-Izquierdo & Darmody, 2017) can be mitigated by local sensitivity to the individual student’s needs, through collaboration with specialized teachers.

In conclusion, the politics of reception for newly arrived migrant students is developing in Aalborg Municipality, not only at the municipal level, but also locally at schools, because specialized and mainstream teachers negotiate what constitutes a good reception. In their negotiations, there is ongoing interaction between the dominant approaches, although notions of social mixing through direct enrollment dominate. Thus, it is important that the newly arrived student becomes like and equal to the other students, by being able to communicate (sometimes mediated by translation technology or classmates) and knowing Danish school culture. Simultaneously, however, there is a focus on the individual student’s needs, and special initiatives
and agreements that are contextually sensitive can be launched. Hence, Aalborg Municipality’s “third way” approach mitigates dilemmas by applying discourses from the dominant reception approaches at different times. The professional pedagogical experience from these approaches has led to this contemporary third way mixed approach, illustrating the decentralized character of integration and education politics (Jørgensen, 2012). Hence, municipalities experiment with locally sensitive approaches to solve the broader dilemma of how to handle newly arrived migrant students. However, focus on the dominant reception approaches potentially hinders the development of other approaches, which may be outside what can be done and thought within the discourses available.

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REFERENCES


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