Dilemmas of ‘doing good’: How teachers respond to the care needs of newly arrived refugee and immigrant adolescents in Denmark

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Abstract

There is growing interest in the role of schools in supporting children facing adversity, including children with refugee and immigrant backgrounds. Based on six months of ethnographic fieldwork (December 2018 to June 2019) and interviews with teachers in two classes for adolescent newcomer refugee and immigrant learners in Denmark, this paper explores teacher responses to everyday dilemmas in supporting and caring for refugee and immigrant learners at school with a focus on three key areas: 1) in relation to teaching while safeguarding the adolescents’ self-image, 2) in caring for the adolescents emotionally, socially and physically, and 3) in building trust and being the adolescents’ confidants. Based on the findings, we argue that caring for newcomer adolescents cannot be reduced to questions of formal training and technical skills. Rather, it is intimately linked to attentiveness, experimentation and sensitivity to learners’ needs. Furthermore, we discuss how scholarly analysis of teacher responses to care-related dilemmas can help generate contextualised insights into the broader support needs of teachers engaging in care work in specific social contexts.

Keywords: teachers; care; dilemmas; refugee; immigrant

Introduction

With schools holding the promise of facilitating support for disadvantaged children (Skovdal & Campbell, 2015), current immigration has sparked interest in what schools and teachers can do to care for newcomer refugee and immigrant learners (Fazel et al., 2016; Hamilton, 2013). For this group, it is known that schools are important points of connection to the receiving society, with opportunities for learning, participation, building friendships and belonging (Matthews, 2008). Studies have documented the benefits as well as the problems related to teachers supporting learners' mental health (Baak et al., 2020; Fazel et al., 2016) and psychosocial wellbeing (Norozi, 2019; Pastoor, 2015). Research on reception of refugee and immigrant learners in schools has also illustrated the challenges of academically supporting newcomer learners with different prior school experiences (Hos, 2016; Kernaghan, 2015) or living conditions constraining their abilities to focus on learning (e.g., uncertainty about immigration documents, or having to function as a translator for parents) (McMullen et al., 2020). The presence of newly arrived learners urges teachers to take on complex roles, which they do not always feel prepared for, and scholars have taken critical steps in proposing measures to support teachers (McMullen et al., 2020; Pastoor, 2015).

Yet, the dilemmas and tensions arising from teachers' efforts to care for newly arrived learners through everyday interactions remain poorly understood. To further illuminate the possibilities and limitations of supporting newcomer learners through school settings, and to suggest a novel analytical lens for doing so, we explore how teachers navigate different care-related dilemmas for this group of learners. Based on fieldwork in two preparatory classes for adolescent newcomer refugee and immigrant learners in Denmark, we explore teachers' responses to care-related dilemmas, focusing on three themes: 1) the balance between teaching and safeguarding learners' self-image and aspirations, 2) negotiations of distance and closeness in emotional, social and physical caregiving, and 3) the tensions involved in being learners' confidants and establishing trust with learners and their families. From these explorations, we make two arguments. First, we argue that caring for newcomer learners not only involves professional knowledge and detailed planning, but is intimately linked to attentiveness, experimentation and sensing learners' needs. Second, we argue for the merits of an analytical lens focusing on teachers' care-related dilemmas and discuss how scholarly attention to everyday dilemmas is useful for highlighting areas where teachers may need further support.

The Danish Study Context

Expansion of the European Union and armed conflicts in countries such as Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia have been important drivers of recent immigration to Denmark (Statistics Denmark, 2016, 2020). As of 2021, 11% of the Danish population were immigrants (i.e., individuals born abroad holding residence permits in Denmark), with children and youth under the age of 20 making up approximately 10% of the country's immigrant population (Statistics Denmark, 2021). Denmark offers free compulsory education for children between 6 and 16 years of age. Children arriving in school-age are often assigned to preparatory classes within public schools to learn Danish to enable gradual inclusion in mainstream class within two years. The terms 'newcomer' or 'newly arrived' learners in this article refer to adolescents (ages 13 to 18) from a range of cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds attending preparatory classes.

Care of Newly Arrived Refugee and Immigrant Learners: 'Doing good' by 'trying and undergoing'

Education of newcomer refugee and immigrant learners differs between countries. Norwegian educational services resemble those of Denmark with opportunities of enrolling in specialized programmes (Torslev & Borsch, 2017). The United Kingdom (UK) often includes learners directly in mainstream education upon arrival (Watters & Ingleby, 2004), while Australia and the United States employ a combination of both approaches (Baak et al., 2020; Hos, 2016). Against the backdrop of these varied approaches to newcomer education, research has identified some cross-cutting issues encountered by teachers.

In the UK, Kernaghan (2015) and Jones et al. (2018) found that positive relationships with teachers play a key role in supporting newcomer learners' feelings of belonging, critical to their academic achievement and experience of being valued members of the school and wider society (Due et al., 2016). However, with increasing performance pressures on teachers and limited time and resources, offering pastoral care for newcomers can be difficult (Hamilton, 2013), especially if teachers also have to meet the needs of non-newcomers in the classroom (McMullen et al., 2020). Some teachers feel ill equipped to support newcomers' wellbeing because of cultural and language barriers hampering effective communication with learners and parents (Jones et al., 2018). A study from Denmark found that, in the absence of external support networks, some teachers spend more time caring for learners' psychosocial wellbeing than they are capable of, leading to feelings of failure and taking away time from language-teaching (Häggström et al., 2020). Moreover, as seen in studies in

Norway and the UK, teachers may not be formally trained to provide psychosocial support, leading them to doubt their approaches (McMullen et al., 2021; Pastoor, 2015).

Research has also examined the role of schools in promoting refugee and immigrant learners' mental health. Fazel, Garcia and Stein (2016) have discussed how services for newcomer adolescents located within UK schools may present a less stigmatizing setting for accessing support compared to traditional clinical settings. By bringing services to the schools, schools may act as mediators between newly arrived learners and mental health services, with teachers being in a convenient position to collaborate with mental health professionals and to refer vulnerable learners to services (Baak et al., 2020; Fazel et al., 2016). However, studies in Norway (Pastoor, 2015) and Australia (Baak et al., 2020) have noted that many teachers do not feel confident in referring newly arrived learners due to their inadequate knowledge of learners' psychosocial needs, fear of labelling learners, or because learners do not feel comfortable seeking mental health support.

Furthermore, studies have demonstrated challenges of supporting newly arrived learners academically. Some have never attended school, some are unfamiliar with the power dynamics and expectations of literacy-based school cultures (Matthews, 2008) or have limited or no literacy in their native languages (McMullen et al., 2020). Learners may have experienced interrupted schooling, having spent long periods of time on the move or in poorly resourced refugee camps (Hos, 2016). Teachers have reported difficulty in distinguishing between language barriers and potential special educational needs (SEN) and research has recommended increased integration of second-language teaching and SEN competencies in teachers (Tan et al., 2017). However, language barriers may also mean that teachers fail to recognise the skills of very able learners (Jones et al., 2018). A study from the US found that learners' varying educational backgrounds and unpredictable engagement with the curriculum require teachers to exhibit great flexibility, even if they have extensive training in teaching newcomers (Hos, 2016).

Thus, research has demonstrated the potentials and difficulties of teachers supporting newcomers at school, yet how teachers' care for newcomer learners raises ongoing dilemmas, and how teachers respond to these dilemmas, is currently underexposed. To unpack this issue, we draw inspiration from the work of anthropologist Cheryl Mattingly and educational philosopher John Dewey. In her monograph *Moral Laboratories*, Mattingly (2014) discusses how 'creating a good life' for vulnerable children, or striving to make children flourish, involves ongoing experiments and moral deliberations, asserting that ‘the good’ is established through practice. Through ethnographic accounts of African-American families caring for children with severe chronic illness, Mattingly situates questions of discerning the ‘best good’ for these children within various everyday situations, showing how such endeavours are full of frailty and uncertainty, inseparable from interpersonal relationships and commitments. This is no less true in the case of teachers’ care for newcomer adolescent refugees and immigrants, given their different migration histories, backgrounds and needs. What it means to care as a preparatory class teacher is not pre-determined, but has to be established along the way by navigating tensions and dilemmas. Thus, we use Mattingly’s work to sharpen our analytical gaze, approaching teachers’ pastoral care in the classroom as everyday practices ridden with what we call dilemmas of ‘doing good’ for the learners. In the field of education, Dewey’s (2007) notions of ‘trying’ and ‘undergoing’ are fruitful for drawing empirical attention to how dilemmas of ‘doing good’ are responded to in school settings. ‘Trying’ refers to intentional engagement with the world, in Dewey’s words: ‘an experiment with the world to find out what it is like’ (Dewey, 2007, p. 104). ‘Undergoing’ refers to the impact of the experiment; the world acts back on us, and we reflect on the consequences of our ‘trying’. Usually employed with reference to learners, these concepts also have value in illuminating how teachers try to solve dilemmas of ‘doing good’ for learners.

While the work of Dewey and Mattingly have different philosophical roots, we take inspiration from both, approaching teachers’ responses to care-related dilemmas as the daily ‘trying and undergoing’ of ‘doing good’ for learners. By highlighting frailty and ambiguity in teachers’ care work, we show how everyday dilemmas are not only a consequence of the experimental nature of ‘doing good’, but often also a consequence of external limitations beyond the teachers’ control.

Methods

The study adopted an ethnographic approach, encompassing observations with varying degrees of researcher participation, informal conversations and interviews with learners and teachers (Madden, 2010). The current article forms part of a larger study on a psychosocial intervention for newcomer refugee and immigrant adolescents, implemented by the teachers in the spring of 2019. We report on data from the initial stages of research prior to the intervention, which aimed to develop an in-depth understanding of the pre-existing care and support relations in the two school contexts. Since the aim of this paper is to foreground the teachers' perspectives, the learner interviews will not be cited here. They have been discussed elsewhere (Borsch et al., 2021).

Field Sites and Participants

The two preparatory classes in this study comprised learners in the final years of compulsory school holding residence permits, either as refugees, or as family members reunified to refugees or parents moving to Denmark for employment. The classes were located in different parts of Denmark. One school, henceforth referred to as Stonebridge School, was located in a predominantly working-class neighbourhood in a major city. This school had a high proportion of learners with Danish as a second language (around 40%) and newcomers in the preparatory class (ages 13 to 16) came from many different countries. The other school, referred to as Lakeside School, was located in a smaller town with predominantly ethnic Danish inhabitants, which had received a high number of refugees a few years earlier. Most newcomers in this class were from Syria, Eritrea and Afghanistan and were 15 to 18 years old. These differences between the settings fostered a nuanced understanding of the variations between the school environments of newcomer adolescents and the dilemmas embedded within them.

At Stonebridge School, two female teachers (Kirsten and Julie) shared the responsibility for the class. At Lakeside School, two female (Camilla and Marie) and one male teacher (Ole) were responsible. The teachers all had previous experience relevant to working with newcomer learners, but none of them had formal training as teachers of Danish as second language. By participating in the research, the teachers hoped to gain new perspectives on their work practices, feeling that school reception of newcomer learners could be further developed. This motivation in itself speaks to the indeterminate nature of 'doing good' as a preparatory class teacher.

Generating and analysing empirical materials

The first author (ASB) spent approximately 180 hours observing and participating in class activities between December 2018 and June 2019. ASB adopted the position of an 'unusual type of adult' (Christensen, 2004, p. 174), interacting primarily with the learners during school hours to learn about their perspectives, while being open about her position as an ethnic majority researcher in her late 20s. Observations were guided by a protocol, focusing on i) how teachers and learners engaged (or did not engage) in caring practices ii) how these practices were expressed verbally and non-verbally and iii) how the practices were shaped by institutional frameworks and time-space dynamics at school. During fieldwork, ASB recorded brief notes in a notebook, which she typed up in greater detail at the end of each day to minimise disruption of the social exchanges she sought to capture (Madden, 2010). Most in-depth interaction and interviews with the teachers took place after school or in the teachers' staff room during breaks. The interviews were conducted in Danish, lasted for an average of 90 minutes, and were steered by a topic guide focusing on i) teachers' motivations for working with newcomers; ii) difficulties and available support in their work, and iii) teachers' understandings of class dynamics and the learners' psychosocial needs. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

Fieldnotes and interviews were analysed in NVivo 12. We developed a coding framework allowing cross-sectional labelling of the empirical material. Inspired by Attride Stirling's (2001) thematic network analysis, we collated the codes into basic themes, exploring the relationship between these. Themes related to similar issues were clustered together in interpretive organising themes in dialogue with the sensitising concepts from the work of Mattingly (2014) and Dewey (2007). The organising themes (*'doing good' in teaching*, *'doing good' beyond teaching*, and *teachers as mediators*) structure the presentation of the findings.

Ethical considerations

The study is registered with the Danish Data Protection Agency. It was conducted in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation of the European Union and international guidelines for research with children and young people (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). Formal ethical approval is not required for this type of research in Denmark. Teachers, learners and learners' parents/caregivers were told that participation was voluntary and of the possibility to withdraw at any time. All participants provided written informed consent (including parental/caregiver consent for learners younger than 15 years of age). Pseudonyms have been used throughout.

ASB also encountered socio-ethical dilemmas (Skovdal & Abebe, 2012) in the field, which informed the analytical focus of this article. As ASB built rapport with the learners, they began sharing personal stories and worries with her, or they would ask for help with practical and personal tasks. ASB sometimes experienced her own dilemmas of 'doing good', struggling to be helpful without giving learners misleading expectations as to what role she would be able to play in their lives. These questions sparked our interest in how teachers, as key professionals in the learners' lives, navigate care-related dilemmas.

'Doing good' in Teaching: Safeguarding Learners' Self-image and Aspirations

The state-mandated purpose of preparatory classes – teaching learners Danish – was not a straightforward task to execute. Key dilemmas related to providing instruction in basic Danish while remaning mindful of the learners' self-image, educational aspirations and, especially in the Lakeside classroom, making room for learners' physical and emotional needs.

At Stonebridge, learners experienced academic setbacks, challenging their self-perceptions. During a break, 16-year-old Chau from Vietnam rushed into the classroom with a friend. She walked resolutely to the chest of drawers in the back of the room and pulled out a folder with Danish language worksheets. 'Look at this!' she exclaimed to her friend. 'We do this, but it is so easy, like we are children'. Now also addressing ASB and other learners in the room, she showed a page in the folder. The worksheets had limited amounts of text and numerous illustrations, which looked like something out of a children's book. The teachers were aware of this discrepancy between learners' cognitive maturity, given their age, and their limited knowledge of the Danish language. During an interview, Kirsten reflected on how she recently introduced teaching materials tailored to preparatory classes:

> The interesting thing was that a material, which to a high degree tried to meet them in their needs – that actually repulsed them […] being degraded to the level where you have to sit and practice: "My name is, and I live in… I am so and so old" […] It almost amounted to singling them out, to exhibiting: "*This* is what you need". Cognitively, they are on a different level where they want to discuss topics and philosophy and history and science, all of which are on a level where they cannot express themselves in Danish yet […] So I thought, I need to put this away and I told them openly, consciously: "I think this is putting a halt to your motivation. And we cannot ruin it, so we must try to do things differently".

Most learners in the Stonebridge class had attended school for many years in their countries of origin. Unfamiliarity with the Danish language challenged their self-image as competent participants in school life. This presented Kirsten with a dilemma: She had introduced the teaching material to meet the learners' academic needs, but realized that it would not benefit their motivation. What to do then? How to support the learners as language minority students without potentially damaging their self-image? These questions were subject to what Mattingly (2014) would call 'ongoing moral deliberation'. In attempts at 'doing good' by addressing the practical question of teaching Danish in conjunction with the moral question of caring for the learners' self-image, Kirsten was in a process of trying and undergoing (Dewey, 2007), continuously tinkering with her approach.

In the Lakeside classroom, most learners had come to Denmark from war-torn countries, many having experienced interrupted schooling. Yet, they did have educational aspirations. Teachers attempted to be supportive while remaning realistic with the learners. Camilla explained:

> Many want to become engineers and lawyers and medical doctors and such, and I have a hard time imagining that because they arrived so late in life. And I have also been honest and told them – also just the way in which they attend school – it is not like they just sit down and beaver away […] they cannot muster up the energy to do that right now, but we have been honest and told them, maybe their children can attain such a high education, without meaning to take away their ambitions. I think one should never do that.

Learners' dreams of university degrees and prestigious careers presented Camilla with a dilemma. Feeling responsible for aligning the learners' expectations with what she considered more realistic scenarios, she was still trying not to discourage them from becoming flourishing individuals with aspirations for the future. Furthermore, learners' fluctuating needs and emotions required a redefinition of the state-mandated success criterion of teaching learners Danish, as Ole explained:

> I experience on a daily basis how they… intensively and actively counteract their own learning and development and I have been really puzzled by that. But now I think that I am more knowledgeable […] We have been assigned a mentor who is a psychologist and who has taught us a lot about how far from a normal state these kids actually are. That they are traumatized and

> therefore unable to take the straight route to the goal. But that they often take a diverging route.

Recognising that many learners did not sleep at night, or that they sometimes appeared withdrawn and hopeless, the Lakeside teachers had to reshape their ideas about attaining 'the goal'. In the back of the classroom was a wooden bench where tired learners were allowed to rest – something that the teachers normally considered unacceptable, but which they allowed here. From the perspective of Mattingly, this shows how caring may involve an 'accommodation of a nonstandard scene of action' (2014, p. 35) to realise a 'momentary best good' – in this case, letting learners get some much-needed rest even though they have class. On the first day of fieldwork, Ole told ASB: 'In this classroom, you have to think like an artist, not like a bike mechanic', alluding to the policy expectation that teachers mechanically follow meticulous teaching plans to achieve the goal of teaching learners Danish. However, he explained, improvisation was key in the classroom since the ebb and flow of learners' emotions and needs evaded any attempts at planning. While the learners at Lakeside had a different academic starting point than those at Stonebridge, a similar dynamic was present: teaching in preparatory class was not merely about technical skillfulness in communicating subject matters, but was deeply intertwined with moral efforts at safeguarding the learners' self-image, dreams for the future, and catering to their immediate needs. Thus, all teachers in this study recognized that supporting learners academically was also about holding space and caring for their wellbeing.

'Doing good' beyond teaching: Close, but not too close

Teachers cared for the learners beyond the academic in three significant ways: 1) by connecting with learners emotionally; 2) by facilitating learners' social lives; and 3) by showing physical affection. Each of these practices caused different types of dilemmas for the teachers.

At Lakeside School, emotional caregiving was an integral part of the teachers' ways of engaging with the learners. The classroom atmosphere was warm and intimate. Almost daily, the teachers had personal conversations with the learners, and many greeted the teachers with a hug in the morning. Camilla reflected on the great sense of responsibility that came with this intimacy:

> It is great to be important. I think most people like that. And being met with a hug, that is just them showing joy and acceptance of me being me. That

> makes you grow. It definitely does. And then you want to do a little more – and that is the issue. I was actually a little stressed out at one point. It is a bit personal, but they [the school leadership, ed.] wanted to remove me from this area of responsibility because it was clear to them that these learners are the ones that take up all the space in my head at night. I was thinking so hard about what I could do to help them. And then they wanted to remove me from them, but at the same time, this is the task that gives me so much […] and it's no good either to take away something that is so important. I can't even begin to understand that I have been a teacher for so many years without having learners like them.

Being a significant adult in the learners' lives was highly rewarding to Camilla. It was what Mattingly (2014, p 23), with reference to Williams (1981), describes as a *ground project* – an activity holding such profound meaning that giving it up would involve a loss of identity and sense of purpose. Yet, for Camilla, this commitment also entailed paying the costs of emotional labour. Things were further complicated since no mental health support for young refugees was available in the municipality and the school psychologist only worked with learning difficulties. This made teachers feel responsible for taking on therapeutic roles. Camilla used the metaphor of a 'fine, little box' where she kept the stories that the learners told her; stories of flight, of family troubles, and of the fear of being deported. Sometimes the box would overfill and Camilla would not know what to do. To avoid overflowing with the learners' stories in the absence of external support, a certain distance was required. But how to achieve this? The school leader had given Camilla a special work phone for learners to call, which she could switch off during weekends, but some learners contacted Camilla via Facebook Messenger – a familiar platform to them. Although teachers are generally discouraged from communicating with learners via social media, Camilla sometimes felt inclined to respond, arguing that the learners had no one else to talk to. Marie also reflected on the balance between being available and taking care of herself:

> It is about putting your foot down but also letting them in at the same time. So it is like: "no, right now I have to go to a meeting, but I would be happy to speak with you when I have time". Maybe not say: "I will speak with you at 10", because I do not know if I will be available at 10, so I do not want to

> make too many promises, but to let them know, "I would be happy to speak with you when I have time. I would love to hear what is on your mind".

For Marie, setting clear expectations with learners about her availability was key, recognizing their need to be heard while maintaining authority over her schedule. The teachers considered this approach necessary as time was scarce – a general issue for all teachers in the study. None of them had been allocated solely to the preparatory classes because of resource limitations in both schools. While Kirsten expressed concern that she was only 'half present' for the learners, the need to shuffle between different classes made Marie feel that meeting the learners' emotional needs 'can almost only go wrong because you have so little time'. Thus, in line with Mattingly's (2014) notion that caring for children often provokes self-critique, the teachers never knew if they were doing enough to help.

In comparison to Lakeside, Stonebridge School had a more elaborate internal support network with specialized teachers available for speaking with learners about their troubles, as well as a school psychologist and a school social worker. The teachers also referred learners who were not thriving to an organization in the city, which offered free and anonymous counselling to young people. Thus, more than being bound up with emotional caregiving responsibilities, the teachers at Stonebridge considered themselves important facilitators of the adolescents' social lives in Denmark. Kirsten introduced the learners to the youth club, a municipal institution offering after-school activities and courses free of charge, including art classes and sports. Some learners enrolled, but others said their parents had been worried about them traveling across the city to the club. Kirsten tried to suggest solutions to the learners, that their parents could go with them the first time and see that transportation was no big deal. Similarly, she tried to support learners who she knew were challenged in developing social relationships outside of school. An example was a 16-year-old Ghanaian girl who felt that her social life was being restricted by her responsibilities at home:

> We have talked about what it is like for her to have all these domestic chores and whether or not it was fair and spoke to her father about how she also needs space to be her […] She did not want me to speak to her father directly, so we agreed – because her parents are divorced and the mother lives in England – we agreed that she talked to her mother, then the mother would

> talk to the father and then I checked back with her […] and that has made things better.

When responding to the girl's concerns, being sensitive to family dynamics was key, in this case by listening to the girl and letting her mother be a mediator. By undergoing the consequences, Kirsten saw that her approach, or what Dewey (2007) would refer to as her 'trying', had been successful. This exchange happened in a context of limited transmission of information from municipal caseworkers to the school about the learners' family backgrounds. When new learners enrolled in preparatory class, the school only received sparse information about their backgrounds and family situations. Consequently, the teachers sometimes felt unsure about how to support learners outside of school.

Sensitivity and treading carefully were also critical qualities when it came to physical affection. In both classes, teachers regularly demonstrated that they cared about the learners by giving them a hug, stroking their backs, or placing a comforting hand on a shoulder. This was particularly important in preparatory class since body language transcended language barriers. While it is common for teachers in Denmark to be friendly and informal with learners, the teachers knew that physical interactions could be misinterpreted. Marie, Camilla, Ole and Kirsten described how they were constantly trying to sense the adolescents' boundaries and (re)confirm with them whether or not physical contact was appropriate. Julie, the other teacher responsible for the preparatory class at Stonebridge, reflected on this from a different angle:

> Maybe that is part of the reason why things are going so well with me and the learners, because I am not afraid of giving them a hug […] I don't think about the possible consequences. Because there *can* be consequences, unfortunately there are some really crazy cases around the country. Teachers who are in trouble because they gave a hug or placed a hand on a shoulder. Then suddenly, you have hit a learner, right? […] but I am just like, okay, but we are also human beings!

Julie was well aware that showing the learners physical affection could be misinterpreted. However, she chose to approach this dilemma from the standpoint that teachers 'are also human beings', hence it was only natural and right to hug the learners occasionally. Seen through the lens of Mattingly

(2014), Julie thus prioritised one kind of ‘good’ (bonding with learners through a hug) over another ‘good’ (keeping potential misunderstandings and accusations at bay).

Teachers as Mediators: Issues of Confidentiality and Trust

The teachers played an important mediating role, especially concerning contact between the school and homes. Both classes had regular parent-teacher conferences where teachers met individually with learners and parents. On the day of one of these conferences at Lakeside School, 17-year-old Khalil told ASB about his concerns about coming forward to his parents about his academic progress, which was not going as smoothly as they expected. The teachers knew that such issues should be communicated delicately. This placed demands on them as mediators between the school and the homes, as Marie explained:

> We have to say how they are doing in school and we do not keep anything secret. That is very important for me to say. But you *can* downplay some things because if a learner tells me that their family will be extremely mad at them if they find out that they are not better at Danish or math, then we might not say “well, this is how poorly they are doing in Danish and math”. Then we try to talk to the parents about how the learner can improve instead […] If, for example, there has been a big conflict because one of the girls has been in love with someone – that is something we would never mention to their families […] And if there is something that we feel it is very important to involve the parents in, we would probably go through the municipality and not contact them ourselves, because there are so many other things at stake, which we cannot always correctly assess or understand.

Thus, the teachers had to tiptoe in their capacity as the learners’ confidants while simultaneously being accountable to the families. The teachers’ hesitations towards contacting families directly arose as they were unsure of how to communicate with the families without potentially escalating tensions. Like at Stonebridge School, this dilemma of ‘doing good’ was tied to the way in which the communication and collaboration between teachers and families was structured; it was very limited. Ideally, Marie would have liked to involve the families in what she called a ‘family school’, increasing parents’ familiarity with the school and the teachers’ knowledge of the families. However, since preparatory classes were not a local political priority at the time, she did not see possibilities of securing resources for this.

Establishing trust and confidentiality with new learners in class was also a critical issue, especially at Stonebridge School, which often received new learners. Julie explained how she, to her own surprise, gained the trust of a learner who had only been in the class for three weeks and was not feeling well:

> I find out that there are some things going on at home with her personality and being a teenager and all those things and I remember taking her aside for a talk. And then she tells me that she does not like to look people in the eyes. And just then! All the red flags just went “bam, bam, bam” […] we agree that she does not have to tell me anything, but I just want her to know that, “if you want to tell me something, you can always come tell me […] If you don’t feel like you can tell your parents, remember, you can tell me”. And then I sneak in a few words about my special reporting duties […] after a few days she approached me and said, “I have been thinking about it”, and then she looked me in the eyes. […] And she was like: “Well, I have been thinking a lot and I want to share something with you. Remember, feel free to say stop, because I don’t want this to go anywhere right now” […] And I thought, I must have done something right […] I can’t tell you exactly what I did but apparently she has felt recognized and accepted that I did not push her and was like, “Look me in the eyes. You *have to* tell me what is going on”.

From the perspective of Mattingly (2014), building trust involved a tension between two commitments: Julie making herself available to listen and keep secrets not suited for parents *and* being clear that there were things she could not know about without reporting them to the authorities. Julie’s approach to showing the girl that she was there for her was another example of the teachers’ ‘trying and undergoing’ (Dewey, 2007) in navigating dilemmas of ‘doing good’. She couldn’t say exactly what had happened between her and the learner, but seeing the outcome of her actions, she recognized that she ‘must have done something right’.

Stonebridge School had a psychologist available, but referring learners depended on trust and well-functioning communication with the parents. Kirsten explained how she would have liked the school psychologist to follow up on a learner:

> He is a refugee child and has lived in a refugee camp […] the mother of this boy, she is afraid of authorities and that keeps the school from getting the school psychologist to see him, because he has not been thriving and has been fed too little food and such. So we have worked around that by giving him free lunch in the cafeteria […] But his mother is traumatized in relation to authorities and we know from many refugees how a psychologist equals authority and authorities equal power […] But the boy himself, now that he is in this class, I do not think that he shows signs of not thriving. He is happy and free and talks and does his thing, so I have talked to Julie about the history he has, because the system is worried about him […] but it is the mother who is kind of the barrier to us feeling that we can take that last step to make sure that he is doing well.

While Kirsten would have felt better if the boy had seen the school psychologist, to her understanding it was not possible to establish sufficient trust with his mother to carry this through. Like in Lakeside School, day-to-day communication between the teachers and the parents was sparse due to limited time and resources. Thus, the teachers had to rely on the steps that they could take on their own mandate – in this case, applying to the municipality for meal subsidies and observing the boy's demeanour to see if he appeared to be thriving.

Discussion

Drawing on the notion of 'doing good' through 'trying and undergoing', we have explored teacher experiences of, and responses to, care-related dilemmas in preparatory classes. This has both revealed new contours of teachers' care for newly arrived refugee and immigrant adolescents, and highlighted the analytical potential of focusing on teachers' dilemmas of 'doing good'.

In line with other research (Kernaghan, 2015; Matthews, 2008), questions arose in this study about how to 'do good' on a practical level by making sure that the learners acquired sufficient skills in the national language – the state-mandated goal of preparatory classes in Denmark. However, this study indicates how teaching was also intimately linked to efforts at safeguarding learners' aspirations and self-worth, including accommodating their emotional fluctuations. This shows how academic aspects of newcomer education are interwoven with moral aspects of caring for learners. Oikonomidoy (2014) has suggested that teachers can play a key role in raising refugee and immigrant learners' aspirations and confidence by expressing interest in where they see themselves headed in life. Yet, our findings illustrate how raising aspirations also involves dilemmas since many of the learners lagged behind their peers in the Danish school system. Thus, teachers needed to carefully balance between two 'goods' (Mattingly, 2014): encouragement and being realistic with the learners.

Another insight concerns how teachers cared for the learners beyond the academic and took on roles as mediators and learners' confidants. In this regard, teachers had to navigate between the urgency of the learners' needs and their own temporal and emotional availability. They also had to navigate between the social and moral orders of the school and the learners' families. Earlier research attests to teachers' involvement in caring practices for newly arrived learners: teachers facilitate wellbeing-promoting classroom activities (Norozi, 2019); talk to learners about their personal problems (Häggström et al., 2020; Hos, 2016); help them develop coping strategies for everyday life (Pastoor, 2015) and refer them to mental health services (Fazel et al., 2016). However, by highlighting teachers' everyday dilemmas and responses, this study adds an additional dimension to this body of knowledge: it makes explicit how teachers' efforts at 'doing good' for the learners beyond the academic involves balancing acts in making informed decisions about how to best support the learners, in gaining the trust of learners and their families, and in teachers' attempts at taking care of themselves in the context of time pressures and poor external support structures.

The empirical insights discussed above were generated through an analytical lens unpacking teachers' responses to care-related dilemmas as continuous efforts to pursue 'the good' (Mattingly, 2014) through processes of 'trying and undergoing' (Dewey, 2007). While it is known that teachers are in need of better internal and external support networks and more comprehensive training in supporting newcomers (Häggström et al., 2020; McMullen et al., 2020; Pastoor, 2015), the analytical framework and findings of this study contributed different perspectives on the challenges that teachers of newcomer learners face.

First, the study foregrounded how ‘doing good’ as a preparatory class teacher is not merely a question of professional knowledge and formal training. Dilemmas around practical (academic) as well as moral ways of ‘doing good’ (beyond the academic) were simultaneously present in the teachers’ efforts at supporting learners. Especially moral deliberations around, and responses to, the learners’ social and emotional needs illustrate that supporting newcomers does not solely pertain to following established procedures, or knowledge of how to identify psychosocial problems requiring intervention. High-quality teacher training and strong links to other professionals are critical tools for supporting newly arrived adolescents. However, teachers’ daily work and caring practices also involved *feeling into* the learners’ situations and (un)spoken needs, continuously balancing different personal and educational ‘goods’. Supporting newly arrived learners was an ever-evolving mastery, which developed through everyday experiments and moral deliberations on how to make the learners thrive.

Second, notwithstanding teachers’ ever-evolving mastery, the analytical framework drew attention to teachers’ needs for support. Many dilemmas were linked to time contraints and limited school resources (including lacking political will to allocate resources), no local mental health services tailored to newcomers, and scarce transmission of information about learners’ backgrounds and families. The latter inhibited communication between teachers and parents. Existing research suggests that newcomer parents struggle to communicate with teachers (Jones, 2015; Matthiesen, 2016). Further studies are needed to understand avenues for improving collaboration between schools and newcomer families. This may provide a space for negotiations of culturally specific understandings of education and psychosocial care (Nadeau et al., 2017), beneficial to teachers’ work.

While teachers tried to support learners on issues typical of adolescence in general (e.g., negotiations of educational aspirations and family conflicts over wishes for greater independence), classrooms for adolescent refugees and immigrants present a unique case. Learners had little influence over the decision to migrate, experienced academic setbacks and had to build a life away from their existing social networks while dealing with the sequels of loss and ruptures (Hamilton, 2013; Jones et al., 2018). One can argue that preparatory classes constitute *extreme cases* (Flyvbjerg, 2006) for dilemmas about meeting learners’ care needs. Still, this study outlines aspects of general interest to educators and scholars working with other groups of learners: the ethnographic focus on care-related dilemmas provides a lens for locally identifying areas where support for teachers might be improved.

We have demonstrated how studying teachers' care-related dilemmas of 'doing good', and how they respond through practices of 'trying and undergoing', promotes an understanding of the uncertain conditions teachers work under and how these conditions intersect with teachers' feelings of responsibility towards learners. Such insight generates contextualised accounts of the challenges teachers face, which can be instructive in tailoring solutions. In table 1, we present some analytical questions to guide future analyses of teachers' care-related dilemmas, including examples from the present study.

The study has some methodological limitations. While the small number of teacher participants follows from the study being an in-depth exploration of two class settings, it is likely that teachers in other contexts experience different challenges. The organization of preparatory class programs varies between Danish municipalities and is subject to change over time, just like there are variations in how schools in different regions or countries approach the reception of young newcomers. This limits the transferability of the findings to other school contexts. Further research into the manifestations of teachers' care-related dilemmas and responses across different school contexts for newcomer learners is warranted.

Conclusion

Through accounts of how preparatory class teachers navigate care-related dilemmas, we have demonstrated how their daily work involves an ever-evolving mastery of 'doing good' for learners, which develops through 'trying and undergoing' with great attentiveness and flexibility. Ethnographic attention to how educational actors handle everyday conundrums in their care work may not only be fruitful in furthering an understanding of the support structures needed to promote the ability of schools to foster wellbeing amongst newly arrived learners. It may also serve as a useful analytical lens to inform research in other educational contexts where professionals are striving to make learners thrive.

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Table 1: Analytical questions for exploring teachers' care-related dilemmas

Objectives of care	Responses	Support needs
What (competing) objectives are teachers pursuing in their care work? *('doing good')* e.g.: ▪ Teaching a new language + Safe-guarding learner self-images and aspirations ▪ Providing pastoral care + Protecting own temporal and emotional boundaries ▪ Building trust/confidentiality + Remaining accountable to parents and municipal social services ▪ Providing mental health referrals + Respecting parental authority	**What do teachers do to solve/address care-related dilemmas?** *('trying' and 'undergoing')* e.g.: ▪ Draw on different types of teaching materials and approaches ▪ Use different means of communication (work phone, social media) ▪ Establish confidential spaces and boundaries ▪ Negotiate leisure activities and learner independence with parents ▪ Show physical signs of affection ▪ Provide alternative forms of support (free meals, observing learner demeanour) **What other actors and/or material objects do they engage with in the process?** e.g., ▪ Parents ▪ School leadership, school psychologists ▪ Cell phones ▪ Teachers and teaching materials ▪ External social/counselling services ▪ A bench in the back of the classroom	**What kinds of teacher support needs do the care-related dilemmas (and teachers' responses) indicate?** e.g., ▪ Increased information exchange between families/municipal social services and the school ▪ Flexible/adaptable teaching materials for adolescent language minority learners ▪ Tools to improve communication with parents ▪ Improved links to organisations working with the mental health and social wellbeing of newcomer adolescents ▪ Political will to allocate additional staffing and funds to allow time for and support with care-related tasks