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Daily life and school engagement: An empirical study privileging the first-person perspectives of unaccompanied asylum-seeking adolescents in a Danish context

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Abstract

Drawing on the tradition of the Danish–German school of critical psychology, this empirical study discusses seven unaccompanied asylum-seeking adolescents' experiences of the process of applying for asylum in Denmark. By privileging the first-person perspectives of the adolescents, the authors explore the conduct of their everyday lives at the asylum centre and at school. The project's findings emphasise the societal, political, social and spatial conditions that contribute to the lack of meaningfulness the adolescents experienced regarding their engagement in schooling. In conclusion, the authors reflect on the potential in privileging the first-person perspective in social pedagogical work.

Keywords: asylum; unaccompanied asylum-seeking adolescents; first-person perspective; meaninglessness; school engagement; critical psychology; social pedagogy

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Introduction

'It is not meaningless to learn; the problem is the circumstances surrounding our education.' These words were uttered by one of seven unaccompanied asylum-seeking adolescents participating in a small-scale research project exploring young asylum-seekers' experiences of the educational system during the process of applying for asylum in Denmark.

As is the case in Finland, Norway and Sweden, asylum policies in Denmark have been tightened in response to the large refugee influx in 2015 and 2016 (Etzold, 2017, p. 1). During this period, Denmark received a significantly higher number of asylum applications from unaccompanied minors (Ministry of Immigration and Integration, 2019, p. 7; Nordregio, 2016). Most Danish literature either focuses on traumas and psychological aspects of life as an asylum-seeker (e.g. Bovbjerg and Kahler, 2007; Jakubczyk, 2012) or describes the challenges related to daily life at asylum centres (e.g. Vitus and Nielsen, 2011). Danish research undertaken within the context of schools explores the general, societal issues related to teaching young children and adolescents with a refugee or immigrant background (e.g. Horst, 2012), but focus on the perspectives of the asylum-seekers themselves is lacking.

Recent international research literature has addressed the pedagogical needs and challenges of supporting the integration and educational practices of asylum-seeking children and adolescents (e.g. Bodon and Votteler, 2017; Mendenhall, Bartlett and Ghaffar-Kucher, 2017; Miles and Bailey-McKenna, 2016; Nilsson and Bunar, 2016; Terhart and von Dewitz, 2017; Thommessen and Todd, 2018; Wofford and Tibi, 2018).

Different methods have been used to uncover the perspectives of young asylum-seekers. For example, Thommessen and Todd (2018) examined how children experienced their new situation in a recipient country using interpretative phenomenological analyses of interviews with adults who had arrived as asylum-seekers in one of two countries, Denmark or England, when they were children. Bodon and Votteler (2017) made observations and undertook interviews with volunteer teachers and workers, examining the pedagogical needs and challenges of children and young adults living in the Calais Jungle, a refugee camp in France. Aiming at illuminating the perspectives of refugee students in a high school in New York, Mendenhall et al. (2017) conducted interviews combined with a participatory visual methodology where students were provided with cameras.

Using a child-centred perspective, Lundberg and Dahlquist (2012) focused on asylum-seeking minors' living conditions in Sweden, while Popov and Sturesson (2015) examined the pedagogical challenges of teaching unaccompanied refugee children in Sweden.

The project presented in this article distinguishes itself from the above-mentioned projects with its focus on the lack of meaningfulness experienced by the adolescents regarding engagement in their schooling.

The research question is as follows: since the seven unaccompanied asylum-seeking adolescents experience a lack of meaningfulness in relation to their engagement in schooling, which conditions (broadly used to denote possibilities and limitations, including societal, political, social and spatial processes) at the asylum centre and in the school contribute to this?

Theoretical framework

The project leans on the tradition of the Danish–German school of critical psychology (see Jartoft, 1996; Mørck, 2006). In this tradition, the first-person perspective of the subject(s) in focus is of the utmost importance to the research carried out. Referring to the term 'first-person perspective', we draw on the work of the German psychologist and founder of critical psychology, Klaus Holzkamp (1983). In critical psychology, gaining a first-person perspective means not only learning how the subject in focus perceives certain things, but also considering the daily practices and conditions that influence the life of the subject in focus (Dreier, 1999, p. 63).

We link the critical psychological term 'first-person perspective' to social pedagogy by referring to Petersen (2015, 2016), a Danish researcher within the field of social psychology and pedagogy. Petersen (2015, p. 62ff, 2016, p. 57) argued for the importance of listening to the personal life experiences of

vulnerable children when developing social pedagogical interventions. According to Petersen, only by doing so can we develop interventions that can prevent or minimise vulnerability.

In Denmark, understanding of the term 'social pedagogy' and the focus of social work carried out is proven to have changed over time in consequence of societal challenges and social political laws (Jensen, 2006; Petersen, 2015, p. 55). Traditionally, social pedagogy in Denmark was carried out as social work with children, adolescents or adults who were placed outside their own home or in other circumstances when receiving help from social institutions. During the last decades, social pedagogy has found its way into general pedagogy in areas such as early childhood day care and schools by focusing on developing interventions to support children and adolescents with learning difficulties or social or emotional difficulties (Petersen, 2015, p. 58f). Thus, in a Danish context, social pedagogical work has come to address a wide range of social and societal challenges.

Informants

The participating asylum-seeking adolescents were all from Afghanistan. They were all 15–16-year-old males living at the same asylum centre which was solely for asylum-seeking minors.

When we first met them, their process of applying for asylum had been underway for more than a year, whereas the usual processing time was four months at that time. None of them at that point knew the outcome of their case. A few had had their application rejected by the Danish Immigration Service and had filed an appeal to the Refugee Appeals Board.

We have only limited information about their background. However, we know that some of them had been living as street children in different European countries before coming to Denmark and most of them showed symptoms of exile stress and traumatisation. Among other things, they expressed great concern for their family members, experienced a sense of meaninglessness and isolation in their everyday life, had trouble sleeping and suffered from memory loss.

According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2016), unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors are among the most vulnerable groups of asylum-seekers. Furthermore, in Denmark, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is not incorporated into legislation on asylum-seeking children. The Convention therefore plays only a marginal role in Danish political work (see Vitus, 2010), which inevitably leaves these adolescents and other unaccompanied minors in an even more vulnerable position.

Research process

Accessing the field through gate-keeping

The adolescents involvement in the project depended on different gate-keepers who, by virtue of their work or personal relationship to the respondents, were in a position to control our access to the respondents (cf. Jefferson, 2004, p. 41; Miller and Bell, 2002, p. 55). The networkers (i.e. the professionals working at the asylum centres, referred to themselves as 'networkers' as most of them were not educated within the field of social education) at the centre acted as gate-keepers by allowing us access to the centre and identifying potential participants. The adolescents were chosen based on three criteria:

- They had all been in Denmark for a year or more and it was assumed that they would have many experiences and opinions to share.
- They all struggled with engagement in schooling to varying degrees.
- They shared the same nationality and languages, Pashto and Dari, which made it easier to provide interpreter assistance.

The adolescents' involvement in the project depended on their acceptance of us and the project. At first, they were sceptical about our intentions. However, after having discussed the purpose of the project and adjusted our expectations, 'Mahmoud' took up the role of gate-keeper by shaking our hands and saying: 'Thank you'. Due to his earlier confrontational behaviour, we had identified him as the informal leader of the group and understood his positive gesture as incipient acceptance of us and the project. During the project, 'Mahmoud' occasionally functioned as a gate-keeper.

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At the school, the teachers were the gate-keepers: they gave us access to their classrooms and made it possible for us to gain insightful knowledge into the teaching and social climate of the recipient classes.

Methodological design

The methodological design supports our aim of emphasising collaboration between practice and researchers (cf. Dreier, 1999, p. 61). The project was carried out in five phases: (1) An initial phase to select the focus through a future workshop; (2) A phase of data collection; (3) A phase of data processing and analysis; (4) A phase of knowledge-sharing and reflection with the networkers and teachers; and (5) A concluding phase, evaluating the project with all the participants.

The future workshop, which took place in the last months of 2016, is a method for reflective problem solving (Jungk and Müllert, 1984). Going through three phases, 30 professionals (networkers and leaders) from three asylum centres solely for unaccompanied minors drew attention to the lack of meaningfulness that many adolescents at the three centres expressed in relation to their school engagement. (Note that the three asylum centres that participated in the workshop all operated under the same management. The management decided which of the three centres should be the site of the research.) Thus, we decided to examine the barriers to school engagement – seen through the adolescents' eyes.

Data collection was initiated in May 2017. Privileging the first-person perspectives of the adolescents, we concentrated our attention on photo elicitation interviews (see Collier and Collier, 1986) and used disposable cameras as part of our methodological design.

We started out with seven informants. However, the unpredictable circumstances related to the process of applying for asylum led four of the adolescents to move out of the centre, thereby leaving the project before it was concluded. To ensure that data could be collected within the project's time frame, we decided to hand out the disposable cameras early on in the second phase, encouraging the adolescents to take pictures of whatever influenced their daily lives at the centre and at school. Accelerating the data collection resulted in a limited number of photos and only four of the seven cameras were returned to us. According to the adolescents, most of the photos illustrated random situations and objects. Consequently, the photos have not been subjected to analysis as originally planned but were nonetheless valuable as a starting point for the individual interviews that were supplemented with a theoretically informed interview guide. Note that for ethical reasons only the adolescents who gave informed consent, with a signature, to publication will be referred to and/or quoted in this article (cf. Ministry of Higher Education and Science, 2014).

Before conducting the individual interviews, it was essential to become acquainted with the adolescents and gain their confidence. We visited them in the asylum centre and followed them for two days in school where we undertook participant observations (cf. Szulevicz, 2015) inside and outside the classroom. We also held a meeting with eight networkers at the asylum centre and another with six teachers at the school to explain the project in detail and learn about their general experiences of working with unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors.

The project took an unexpected turn just before the summer holidays when the adolescents received sudden notification from the local authorities that their language school was closing due to too few pupils and high renovation costs. They were being transferred to the municipal school, something they had wanted for a long time. Conveniently, the management and staff at the municipal school saw potential in our project and wanted to participate.

Following data collection, the third phase involved data processing and analysis. Working with the data, we identified some of the conditions that led to meaninglessness and lack of school engagement. In the fourth phase, we shared our findings with the teachers and networkers and discussed how they could respond to the identified conditions. In the fifth and final phase, the project was evaluated with the adolescents, the networkers and the teachers separately.

Altogether, we collected varied empirical data consisting of:

- a written summary from the future workshop
- field notes and photos from the participant observations from two visits at the language school, two visits at the municipal school and two visits at the asylum centre

- photos taken by the adolescents
- transcripts of the individual interviews conducted with four of the adolescents
- sound files from the meetings with networkers and the teachers in the second, fourth and fifth phases of the project
- sound files from meetings with the adolescents in the fourth and fifth phases of the project.

Ethical reflections

Numerous ethical issues arise when doing research involving vulnerable and marginalised population groups. Below, we highlight general considerations and describe how we responded to the ethical complexities arising from our research.

The project presented was conducted in accordance with the Danish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (Ministry of Higher Education and Science, 2014). Our collaboration with the adolescents is based on informed consent. To ensure that it was truly informed, we had two interpreters at our first meeting. The initial purpose and planned course of the project were explained thoroughly and subsequently negotiated with the adolescents to develop a shared understanding of what was involved in the different project stages and what to expect of each other during the process (cf. MacKenzie, McDowell and Pittaway, 2007).

The interpreters helped us go through every part of a written contract that emphasised the participants' rights to leave the project at any time and specified that photos and personal statements would be distributed only with their consent.

Considering the unequal power relation between researchers and participants, we continuously strove to accentuate the participants' self-determination by reminding them of their rights as participants, and by involving them as much as possible in the progress of the research. In the planning of the project, we had favoured the use of cameras as a tool to strengthen their first-person perspectives. Using the cameras gave the adolescents the possibility of selecting and producing the data for the project by diving into their own lives and focusing on the things they considered important and suitable for sharing (cf. Rasmussen, 2017, p. 122; Staunæs, 2001, p. 51). Using this method, the participants could also choose what not to focus on.

Interviews were conducted in a small conference room used for phone-translated conversations and meetings. The adolescents had used the room before and were already familiar with this form of communication. However, their language skills in Danish turned out to be quite solid, and we gave them the choice of having an interpreter or not. To avoid misinterpretations and misrepresenting the adolescents, we tried to sum up their statements at the end of each interview. To ensure a relaxed atmosphere, we prepared coffee and initiated the interview with friendly small talk. We tried to maintain an informal tone throughout the interview. Taking their vulnerable situations into account, we reminded them that it was up to them to choose what to talk about and what to leave out.

In the data-collection period, we encountered some unexpected circumstances that demanded significant ethical reflexivity (cf. Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). For instance, an unpredicted, ethically important moment occurred during an interview. An adolescent shared some urgent problems with the procedure of his asylum application and asked for our help to solve them. In situations like that, we acted in accordance with the given situation without forgetting our role as researchers, and always having the interests of the adolescents in mind. In this particular case, we clarified honestly and respectfully that we were not in a position to help him with problems concerning his asylum case.

Analysis strategy

The empirical data were categorised using meaning condensation (see Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). As a first step, we established an overview, each of us going through all the collected data, looking for preliminary themes associated with our research focus. We compared our preliminary findings, negotiating confluent and diverging issues. Second, we reviewed the data to identify meaning units – text fragments that included information relating to the research question. Aiming for a first-person perspective, we favoured material from the individual interviews. The transcripts from the interviews were thoroughly reviewed and the identified meaning units were classified, interrelated and compared to the negotiated

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themes. Third, the meaning units were condensed into five categories, each representing a different aspect of the adolescents' first-person perspectives on what factors influence their daily lives at the centre and in school:

1. striving for Danishness
2. trapped in time and space
3. the importance of friendship
4. relationships with teachers and networkers
5. learning and education.

The five categories were then subjected to a critical psychological 'conditions, meanings and reasons analysis' (cf. Mørck and Huniche, 2006), weighting the adolescents' narratives (cf. Horsdal, 1999).

Findings: a first-person perspective on daily life and school engagement

Although the five categories are interrelated, they will be presented separately together with the main critical psychological concepts that informed our analysis of each category.

Category 1: striving for Danishness

The adolescents strove for what we refer to as Danishness. Asked about their hopes for the future, some of them said that they wished to pursue an education and contribute actively to society. One adolescent said that he would do his best to get a job where he could help others without taking their religion or cultural background into account. The individual comes first, he explained. 'To strive for Danishness' is interchangeable with the concept of *orientation* that Mørck (2006, p. 269) used to describe a person's telos or orientation toward something. The adolescents' orientation was towards Danish society.

Drawing on the research done by Hervik (2016, p. 275), the adolescents' striving for Danishness can be understood as a response to the generally negative approach to refugees and immigrants in Denmark. Thus, they strove to become a legitimate part of society, which was also expressed through their strong desire to learn the Danish language. The adolescents were aware that language is an important prerequisite for integration into Danish society and for being able to pursue an education. This finding is in keeping with research projects from other countries that highlight the importance attached by newly arrived refugees to the languages of the recipient country for achieving social inclusion and academic achievement (e.g. Miles and Bailey-McKenna, 2016; Thommessen and Todd, 2018; Wofford and Tibi, 2018).

The adolescents also wished for Danish friends. When we conducted the individual interviews, they had just received information about a change of school. The impending change gave them hope that they would not only learn the Danish language but also be able to make Danish friends.

Sometimes, it was difficult for the adolescents to hold on to the dream of becoming a legitimate part of Danish society, as circumstances did not allow them to work actively towards realising that goal. One boy stated that although he was in Denmark, his room was his entire world.

Outside school, he had no or only sparse contact with Danes. The centre was situated far away from any city and participation in cultural and sports activities was impeded by considerable travel time and expenses. At the centre, he found no distractions to prevent him from getting stuck on negative thoughts about his past and current situation. Consequently, he stayed in his room all day trying to keep the memories at bay. The experience of enforced isolation was a common experience with all participants and leads to the second category, discussed in the next section.

Category 2: trapped in time and space

Political, social and spatial conditions seemed to give the adolescents the feeling of being trapped in time and space, which influenced their *conduct of everyday life* (cf. Holzkamp, 1998; Osterkamp, 2000). The stress of waiting and the fact that the asylum centre was situated far away from any city gave them a feeling of being trapped in time and space with very limited access to other social arenas besides the centre and the school. This is what Mørck (2006, p. 48ff) calls *marginality* when referring to a socially marginal position from which a person can experience limited access to social arenas. Despite

this marginal position, they all had hopes and dreams for the future, but the frustration of the present seemed to tie them to the feeling of meaninglessness. This feeling was reinforced by the fact that the adolescents in general were having trouble remembering everyday experiences which led to the feeling of days blurring together.

They had put their lives at risk to get to Denmark where they now found themselves in a position of no longer being able to act. Instead, they had to wait for others to determine their futures. In other words, they had very limited *action potence* (cf. Holzkamp, 1983; Mørck and Huniche, 2006, p. 6), which is the individual's personal disposal over relevant life conditions mediated by society. This made it impossible for them to organise their daily life in ways they found meaningful. Thus, they spent most of the day in their rooms and only attended school sporadically.

Similar ideas are evident in Spiteri (2015) who used interviews to try to understand adolescent asylum-seekers' experiences in further education in Malta. In the interviews, the adolescent asylum-seekers also expressed a feeling of stagnation, though without a feeling of limited action potence, stating 'All I have is "now". I must make the most of it' (Spiteri, 2015, p. 164). Spiteri explained this with the fact that adolescents experience stability and constancy in their school, which contrasts with the uncertainty experienced on their journey to Europe. Conversely, the adolescents we followed did not seem to experience the same constancy in their everyday lives, and the spatial environment at the centre potentially increased the feeling of 'being trapped', as most doors were locked and only the networkers were provided with a key. For instance, the door to the kitchen was locked during daytime, which prevented the adolescents from preparing lunch for themselves when they were supposed to be in school.

At the centre, up to four people shared a room, which was not always easy (see Figure 1). A room-mate crying all night or another one playing music made it difficult to get a good night's sleep. Hence, the adolescents were often too tired to get up and go to school in the morning.

Figure 1. Shared room between one of the adolescents and two other boys, showing how the boys kept all their belongings under the bed, including pots and groceries (Source: 'Jawad').

Category 3: the importance of friendship

Through the concept *conduct of everyday life*, we also saw how being part of a close friendship was crucial to the adolescents' continued existence in an unimaginable life situation, where nothing seemed stable, and where some of them had lost their closest family members. Their ties to each other were experienced as strong enough to last forever and extend across borders. If a friend left the centre, friendships therefore still remained intact, and they stayed in contact using social media.

The adolescents repeatedly emphasised the importance of their friendship, making the concept *coming to an understanding with yourself, we and others* (cf. Mørck, 2006, pp. 44, 258f) relevant in

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our analysis. This concept is a development of Holzkamp's (1998, p. 21) and Dreier's (2001, p. 52) conceptualisation of *coming to an understanding with yourself and others*. To this concept, Mørck (2006, p. 44) added a 'we' to emphasise that the subject is interpellated as part of different communities and action contexts (see also Mørck and Celosse-Andersen, 2019, p. 16). As unaccompanied asylum-seekers, the adolescents' primary action context is the asylum centre where their strong friendship (the 'we') influences their conduct of everyday life. For example, most of the adolescents referred to their friends from the centre as family, as brothers. Two of them explained how the absence of their biological family reinforced their ties to each other to the extent that the bond resembled brotherhood rather than a friendship. Furthermore, they helped each other whenever needed and enjoyed doing things, such as sports activities, together (see Figure 2). Similarly, one teacher explained how a younger boy was messing things up for himself and did not go to school. Some of the older boys took him under their wing and made sure he got back on track and went to school.

Similar findings are reported by Spiteri (2015), who drew attention to the fact that asylum-seeking children and adolescents need to be supported by like-minded others. Kovacev and Shute (2004) point out that effects of acculturation on adjustment are mediated by peer social support.

Figure 2. Two of the boys from the centre on their way to play cricket (Source: Authors, 2021).

Category 4: relationships with teachers and networkers

The adolescents articulated the need for a close relationship with and personal encouragement from teachers and networkers, which seemed to be of significance for the overall conduct of everyday life, both inside and outside school.

In relation to the concept *coming to an understanding with yourself*, *we and others*, we draw on Mørck's (2006, p. 251; Mørck and Celosse-Andersen, 2019, p. 648) Danish concept of *betydningsfulde andre*, which translates as 'significant persons' – people of special significance for the person. In this study, the concept refers to the networkers and the teachers as people with special significance for the adolescents. The networkers at the centre were the closest the adolescents got to a primary caregiver, since their parents had either died, disappeared or for other reasons did not flee with them. This is one of the reasons that their relationships with networkers seemed to be of significance for the overall conduct of everyday life. For example, one boy described how some of the networkers woke them up gently in the morning, while others could seem loud and harsh. How they woke up in the morning influenced their mood throughout the day, and sometimes it determined whether they went to school or not. Some networkers were almost considered family, and when they were at the centre, the adolescents felt more motivated to come out of their rooms and spend time in the living room.

When asked to name a positive memory from their daily life at the centre, all of the adolescents mentioned a party that the networkers had arranged for them. 'This made us feel like we had a family

like everyone else,' one boy said. However, resources at this state-funded centre were so limited that the networkers did not have the time needed to attend to all the children and adolescents living there. An adolescent, 'Jawad', expressed a feeling of being 'put aside' because he was well-behaved, and the networkers were busy attending to the ones who got into trouble. During the individual interview, 'Jawad' articulated the need for more emotional care and attention from the networkers and asked: 'What are we supposed to do? Do we have to commit suicide before they take us seriously?'

Referring to numerous studies within research on refugees' psychosocial adjustment, Thommessen and Todd (2018) stressed the importance of social support from the teacher. Likewise, the teachers were also of special significance for the adolescents. However, according to the adolescents, their relationship primarily concerned school time and did not affect life at the centre.

'Respect' was the word the adolescents used when we asked them to describe a great teacher. By respect, they meant that the teacher listened to them, took time for them and was helpful. However, the good intentions of a respectful teacher were not enough to counterbalance the many conditions that led to lack of meaningfulness in the adolescents' everyday lives. Thus, their engagement with schooling remained sporadic.

Category 5: learning and education

Literature on integration and the educational practices of asylum-seeking children and adolescents concentrates attention on schooling as a means to successful resettlement of refugee minors, and newly arrived refugees' language and literacy skills were found to be of critical importance to social inclusion (e.g. Mendenhall et al., 2017; Miles and Bailey-McKenna, 2016; Taylor and Sidhu, 2012; Terhart and von Dewitz, 2017; Wofford and Tibi, 2018). This was also predominant when the adolescents talked about school. Learning Danish and getting an education were important to them (see Figure 3). Though they all preferred school in Denmark to their former schools in Afghanistan, they were influenced by their learning experiences in their home country. They understood learning as knowledge conveyed in a one-way direction from the teacher to the pupils. This understanding made them give lower priority to subjects like music, craftwork and sports. They found it hard to understand the learning potential in these subjects, which the teachers considered particularly relevant for pupils who had problems with sitting still and concentrating for longer periods.

Figure 3. At school. One of the adolescents studying Danish (Source: Authors, 2021).

The primary question posed by this paradox does not seem to be whether the aesthetic subjects are effective and relevant, but whether they are calibrated to the demands of this group of pupils. The adolescents needed consistent expectations that they could adhere to but instead they were met

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with a relatively loose learning structure. At the language school we observed that the pupils could more or less choose whether they wanted to participate in learning activities or not. This loose structure made them feel that nothing was expected of them at school. When changing to the municipal school, they all looked forward to being in a more structured learning environment, to higher demands from the teachers and to being given homework.

Privileging the 'first-person perspective' in social pedagogical work

As argued in the five categories, the adolescents found that their lives were influenced by societal, political, social and spatial conditions that individually and together affected their school engagement. Among other things, they assigned great importance to having a close and respectful relationship with their networkers and teachers who were of great significance to their conduct of everyday life, both inside and outside school.

Correspondingly, other findings within the field of social pedagogy accentuate the importance of a close relationship between professional and child in assuring the child's future learning and development (see Bryderup, Andersen and Nagbøl, 2003; Bryderup, Madsen and Perthou, 2002).

When we discussed the five categories as a group, both the networkers and the teachers became inspired to make changes to their professional practices.

Based on the adolescents' strongly articulated need to be heard and to have influence on their lives, the networkers decided to create a more distinct *participatory democratic climate* in the asylum centre in connection to the newly established house meetings. The networkers wanted to pay more attention to the adolescents and show them that their voices were being heard. The adolescents supported the initiative and focused on getting as many children and adolescents as possible to participate actively in the house meetings.

At the municipal school, the teachers were inspired to work towards *better inclusion of the adolescents* in school because the adolescents were frustrated to find themselves rather isolated from their Danish peers who attended the 'regular' classes. Thus, the teachers began organising monthly workshops where Danish pupils and asylum-seeking pupils from the recipient class worked closely together to solve different tasks that required no high level of Danish-language skills. The teachers' initiative exemplifies 'the aim for social inclusion', which Langager and Vonsild (2007, p. 4) emphasise as the primary aim of today's social pedagogy.

When evaluating the project, it became clear that in spite of their intentions none of the networkers had worked purposefully to create a more participatory climate in any way. We found that this was due to limited resources at the centre and the fact that social pedagogical aspects of caregiving were generally given low priority in the daily routines at the asylum centre. However, the adolescents had taken their part in supporting the concept of house meetings seriously. Thus, more children and adolescents were now participating actively in the house meetings, and both the networkers and the adolescents felt that they had taken a step towards a more distinctly participatory democratic climate at the centre.

At the municipal school, the workshops had become an successful ongoing event. The teachers explained that most of the participating pupils looked forward to the next workshop. Also, the Danish and the asylum-seeking pupils now greeted each other when they randomly met around the school. This can be seen as a small but important step towards making Danish friends and being part of a group outside of the asylum centre. Thus, the workshops produced legitimacy and societal recognition within the adolescents' new schooling community. This is what Mørck (2010, p. 176) called *expansive learning*, referring to a kind of learning that partly transcends marginalisation through changed participation and recognition by other participants in changed communities.

The two examples above demonstrate that it is through the professionals' social pedagogical practices that the adolescents' feeling of meaninglessness could be potentially transcended. However, only by listening to and learning from the adolescents' first-person perspectives were the professionals able to identify the relevance of changing their practice.

In order to listen to and learn from the first-person perspective of people in vulnerable positions, the professionals must initiate an exploratory collaboration with the subject(s) in focus. The objective

is understanding how they experience their lives, and how their lives are influenced by different daily practices and conditions (Dreier, 1999, p. 63; Mørck, 2006, p. 257). The attempt itself, to privilege the first-person perspectives of the subject(s) in focus, can be considered a social pedagogical intervention as it is likely to increases the individual's feeling of having action potence.

Privileging the first-person perspective in social pedagogical work differs from what Højholt (2011, p. 52f) calls 'knowing beforehand'. Her findings indicate that pedagogical work is often based solely on professional knowledge and experiences. This leads the professionals to assume that they *know beforehand* what the people in vulnerable positions need. By knowing beforehand, the professionals are not able to develop a social pedagogical practice where people in vulnerable positions, like the asylum-seeking adolescents, are considered experts on their own life experiences.

The study outlined in this article points to the potential of implementing the critical psychological term 'first-person perspective' in social pedagogical work. By drawing on the first-person perspective of the adolescents, the networkers and teachers gained an understanding of the adolescents' feeling of meaninglessness that was (re)produced. It allowed them to initiate social pedagogical interventions that would contribute to a greater sense of meaningfulness in the adolescents' daily lives, potentially affecting their engagement in schooling.

The term 'first-person perspective' can make significant contribution to the ongoing and growing research within the field of social pedagogy (e.g. Bryderup et al., 2003; Jensen, Petersen and Wind, 2015). By privileging the first-person perspective, professionals and researchers gain a first-hand insight into both the societal and individual aspects of vulnerable people's lives which creates the knowledge needed to develop social pedagogical interventions that can potentially prevent or minimise vulnerability.

Authorship statement

The research project referred to in this article was performed by both authors who also wrote the entire article together. Both authors are to be considered first author.

Author biographies

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interests with this work.

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