

Nyström, Sofia; Dahlstedt, Magnus; Fejes, Andreas; Mešic, Nedžad  
**Mobilising experiences of migration. On the relational work of study circle leaders with asylum seekers**

*European journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults* 11 (2020) 3, S. 321-333



Empfohlene Zitierung/ Suggested Citation:

Nyström, Sofia; Dahlstedt, Magnus; Fejes, Andreas; Mešic, Nedžad: Mobilising experiences of migration. On the relational work of study circle leaders with asylum seekers - In: *European journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults* 11 (2020) 3, S. 321-333 - URN:

urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-210907 - DOI: 10.3384/rela.2000-7426.ojs1797

<http://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-210907>

<http://dx.doi.org/10.3384/rela.2000-7426.ojs1797>

in Kooperation mit / in cooperation with:



<http://www.ep.liu.se>

#### Nutzungsbedingungen

Dieses Dokument steht unter folgender Creative Commons-Lizenz: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/deed.de> - Sie dürfen das Werk bzw. den Inhalt vervielfältigen, verbreiten und öffentlich zugänglich machen sowie Abwandlungen und Bearbeitungen des Werkes bzw. Inhaltes anfertigen, solange Sie den Namen des Autors/Rechteinhabers in der von ihm festgelegten Weise nennen und das Werk bzw. den Inhalt nicht für kommerzielle Zwecke verwenden.

Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

#### Terms of use

This document is published under following Creative Commons-Licence: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/deed.en> - You may copy, distribute and render this document accessible, make adaptations of this work or its contents accessible to the public as long as you attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor. You are not allowed to make commercial use of the work, provided that the work or its contents are not used for commercial purposes.

By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of use.



#### Kontakt / Contact:

peDOCS  
DIPF | Leibniz-Institut für Bildungsforschung und Bildungsinformation  
Informationszentrum (IZ) Bildung  
E-Mail: [pedocs@dipf.de](mailto:pedocs@dipf.de)  
Internet: [www.pedocs.de](http://www.pedocs.de)

Mitglied der

  
Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

## Mobilising experiences of migration: On the relational work of study circle leaders with asylum seekers

*Sofia Nyström*

Linköping University, Sweden (sofia.nystrom@liu.se)

*Magnus Dahlstedt*

Linköping University, Sweden (magnus.dahlstedt@liu.se)

*Andreas Fejes*

Linköping University, Sweden (andreas.fejes@liu.se)

*Nedžad Mešić*

Linköping University, Sweden (nedzad.mesic@liu.se)

### Abstract

*Adult education and its teachers have an important role when it comes to providing knowledge that prepares asylum seekers for a potential life in a new country of residence. In this article we focus on the study circles organised by study associations and analyse the way study circle leaders (SCLs) mobilise their experience of migration in their work with asylum seekers. The article is based on interviews with SCLs and managers, who have been SCLs themselves, and by drawing on a social psychological approach, we analyse SCLs' relational work with the participants. The analysis shows that SCLs' migrant background is mobilised as a pedagogical resource and has a prominent influence on the relationship with the participants. However, the relationship is a balancing act, since there is a risk that the asymmetrical pedagogical relationship becomes more symmetrical and thus turns into friendship, guardianship and/or social work.*

**Keywords:** Asylum seekers; migrants; popular education; study circle leaders



## Introduction

In times of migration, adult education gains an increasingly central role in providing asylum seekers with support that helps them to handle their current situation when waiting for a decision on their asylum application, as well as providing knowledge that prepares asylum seekers for a potential life in a new country of residence (Fejes, Aman, Dahlstedt, Gruber & Nyström, 2018; Fejes, Dahlstedt, Mešić & Nyström, 2018). In such work, as it has been pointed out, the qualities of teachers become important, not least teachers' own experience of migration and of settling in a new country of residence, i.e. their personal qualities (Colliander, 2020; Rubenstein Reich & Jönsson, 2006).

Such an important role for adult education and teachers became visible not least in 2015, when Sweden faced the largest number of asylum seekers since the Second World War, increasing from 54 000 in 2013 to 81 000 in 2014 and then 163 000 in 2015. Among the asylum seekers, the majority came from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan (Swedish Migration Agency, 2020). The government mobilised several initiatives targeting adult asylum seekers. One of the largest of these initiatives, counting the number of participants, was *Swedish from day 1* in which the government commissioned study associations to provide adult asylum seekers with an introduction to the Swedish language and society, in the form of study circles. Between the autumn of 2015 and the end of 2017, more than 120 000 unique participants (asylum seekers) participated in such activities, which made up approximately two thirds of all adult asylum seekers coming to Sweden during this period (Swedish Government, 2017; Fejes, 2019; Fejes, Aman, Dahlstedt, Gruber & Nyström, 2018; Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2017).

Within study associations, those who act as “teachers” are called study circle leaders (SCLs). These are volunteers who, for free or for modest payment, act as leaders for small groups of participants, i.e. they are not professional teachers. The pedagogical idea behind study circles is that a group of people meet in order to collectively enhance their knowledge on a topic of joint interest. The circle leader is free to organise the circle in the way he or she finds best, in dialogue with participants (see e.g. Gustavsson, 2013). The leader is thus assigned the role based on personal qualities rather than formal qualifications. In this article, the aim is to analyse how such personal qualities are mobilised within the framework of study circles targeting adult asylum seekers.

## Study associations and Swedish from day 1

In this article, attention is directed towards study associations in Sweden, and their work with asylum seekers. Study associations are part of Swedish popular education which, besides study associations, includes folk high schools as institutions. These institutions are funded by the State, at the same time as they are ‘free and voluntary’ with high autonomy from the State, i.e. they can organise whatever courses they like, and design them as they like. There are no grades, and participation is voluntary. Such a relationship between popular education institutions and the State is part of the corporatist Swedish welfare model (Micheletti, 1995; Premfors, 2000). In such a model, relations between the State and civil society organisations have been construed as important for developing a more democratic society. The idea was that decisions would thus be more embedded in broad layers of the population, while high levels of participation in the activities of such organisations would contribute to the democratic fostering of the population (Dahlstedt, 2009; Edquist, 2009).

If we relate the Swedish case of popular education to the wider literature, the notion of popular education is not singular. However, some common denominators have been

identified, such as the collective notion of learning in which the collective, and its individuals, are resources for learning, the political dimension of popular education (social change), dialogue across knowledge domains as well as between people, and the idea that people engaged in popular education should be people of change (Kane, 2013). Popular education is often also construed as being ‘against the state’ – as activities for the broader masses who are not part of the elite, and thus, popular education is shaped as unique, or at least different as compared to State organised education (see e.g. Flowers, 2009). However, in the Swedish case, popular education emerges in a close relationship with the State.

Today, the Swedish State provides basic funding to folk high schools and study associations, in order for these institutions to provide courses and study circles of their own design, in terms of content as well as pedagogical forms. Such circles range from courses in different languages, courses in how to apply for a job, music, instruments, dance, literature, wine tasting and so on (or rather it could be anything). Further, participation in such activities is voluntary (Swedish National Council of Adult Education, 2020). Thus, popular education in Sweden is ‘free and voluntary’ in terms of organisation as well as participation. However, study associations and folk high schools need, at least in relation to activities conducted based on State funding, to follow the state aims for popular education, broadly defined in terms of giving ‘everyone the possibility, together with others, to increase their knowledge and “bildung” for personal development and participation in society’ (SFS 2015:218). Popular education should also, according to the State’s aims, support activities that contribute to the strengthening and development of democracy, increase people’s influence over their life situation, create engagement in the development of society, and close the educational gaps between individuals and groups in society (SFS 2015:218).

Besides basic State funding, popular education institutions receive funding from county councils and municipalities, as well as through commissioned tasks by the government. *Swedish from day 1* is one example of activities based on the latter kind of funding, where the State commissioned popular education organisations to provide study circles targeting adult asylum seekers. Such study circles were arranged across most of the 290 municipalities in Sweden. The circles focused on activities that aimed to give participants a basic knowledge of Swedish, as well as knowledge about Swedish society. The participation of the asylum seekers was voluntary, and the study associations were free to organise the circles anyway they saw fit.

### *Study circle leaders*

As already described, those who work in the circles are the SCLs. These are persons who are engaged as leaders based on their personal qualities rather than their formal education. Thus, the role of the SCL is distinctly different as compared to the role of a ‘teacher’ in formal adult education (or in compulsory and upper secondary school). However, there is a surprisingly limited amount of research on the work carried out by the SCLs. Some of the main findings from available research (see Andersson, 2001; Bergström, Bernerstedt, Edström & Krih, 2014; Edström, 2014) point to how SCLs usually focus on different aspects of their task: they either focus mostly on the *content* of learning and the pedagogical practice, on the *social* aspects of the pedagogical practices, or on the *ideological* aspects of the organisation behind the specific study circle (Andersson, 2001). Further, Edström (2014) study also points to how, in order for the SCL to be construed as competent, they need to be competent in the subject they teach, as well as being socially competent. The latter competence includes an engagement and ability to engage, a will to

share one's knowledge, the ability to see and to empower participants, and to be open to renewal.

Research that specifically focuses on the work of SCLs targeting migrants (see e.g. Fejes, 2019; Osman, 1999, 2013) mainly discusses the hierarchical relations that emerge in study circles. In such relations migrants, on the one hand, are construed in line with a 'cultural deficit paradigm', as culturally different and lacking the knowledge and skills needed in order to be part of Swedish society. The Swedish majority, on the other hand, is construed as the norm, to which the migrants are supposed to adapt. This means that the work carried out by SCLs in relation to migrants:

does not mean organising and mobilising ethnic minority groups as a collective to challenge the power structures and demand social justice but to organise them and internalise in the group a democratic ethos and incorporate them into existing democratic structures (Osman, 2013, p. 164).

Further, in line with such results, Fejes (2019) has illustrated how asylum seekers in study circles easily end up construed as not yet citizens, as different and thus in need of further knowledge in order to adapt to Swedish society. The teaching carried out thus easily ends up in teaching asylum seekers about what the SCLs construe as Swedish traditions. The same kind of relation between SCLs and asylum seekers appears, whether or not the SCL was born in Sweden, Fejes points out.

In sum, research on the work of SCLs, and particularly in relation to migrants, is scarce. At the same time, available research points to the need for further work in this area. In this article, we wish to contribute knowledge on the role of SCLs' personal qualities in their work with asylum seekers. We do so by focusing on the relational work carried out by the SCLs.

## Theoretical framework

In this article, we approach the relational work of SCLs by drawing on a social psychological approach, where social interactions are understood to 'lie at the heart of classroom learning' (Gehlbach, 2010, p. 360). Based on such a perspective, Gehlbach (2010) has argued the need for teachers to develop competence in social perspective taking (SPT). Thus, in order for teachers to contribute to students' learning, they need – as accurately as possible – to decipher students' thoughts and feelings in the specific learning situation they are located in. Being able to understand how others perceive a situation is a personal quality that requires considerable motivation on the teacher's part. However, this quality may also be obscured, in the sense that teachers for example ascribe personal traits or certain behaviour to the students, rather than evaluating the existing contextual factors conditioning the students' learning (Gehlbach, 2010).

In line with an SPT perspective, asymmetrical relations between teacher and students are necessary in order to enhance learning (Aspelin & Persson, 2011). Amongst other things, such relations are based on the teacher's previous experience and knowledge of what it means to be subjected to pedagogical influence, as well as the teaching mission of supporting students' development. Students, on the other hand, do not have the possibility to take the professional perspective of the teachers, nor do they have a responsibility to support someone else's development. A pedagogical relationship is therefore built on a unidimensional encompassment. However, another risk related to SPT is psychologisation and intimisation, occurring when a socially-oriented teacher becomes

excessively involved in the life world of the students. When this happens, some of the pedagogical possibilities in an otherwise asymmetrical relation may be squandered.

## Method and analysis

This study focuses on the largest study association in Sweden, the Workers' Educational Association (ABF). ABF was the association that enrolled most participants in *Swedish from day 1* between 2015 and 2018. Six different ABF locations where *Swedish from day 1* was carried out were chosen for further study – located in one large city, one medium-sized city and two small towns.

In order to gain insight and background information on what took place in these study circles, before conducting interviews, we participated as observers in each location, taking field notes and conducting informal conversations with managers, SCLs and participants. We also collected documentation concerning the activities, such as course plans and teaching material. The observations also made it possible for the informants to get acquainted with us and to get a sense of what we were doing, which made it easier to plan and conduct interviews. At each location a sample of SCLs was chosen for semi-structured interviews. The SCLs were selected since they were responsible for leading the study circles in *Swedish from day 1*. Among the SCLs, four were female and five male, six worked in locations in the large city, while three worked in the other three locations. We also interviewed nine managers, three females and six males, of which five had been or were SCLs combined with their work as managers. These nine managers were selected since they were running the local ABF office where the study took place.

Each interview lasted between 40 and 75 minutes. Each interviewee was informed about the research conducted, the freedom to withdraw at any time, secure storage of the information and the deletion/changing of identifying markers in coming publications in order to safeguard anonymity<sup>1</sup>. The circle leader interviews centred on motives for engagement, their background and path toward becoming an SCL, their teaching and participants, as well their involvement in tasks other than teaching. As will be illustrated, most of the SCLs themselves had experience of migration. Manager interviews focused on the organisation of *Swedish from day 1* and rationales for engagement. The questions asked concerned engagement motives in these activities, their background and path toward becoming a manager, activity organisation, their thoughts about their participants and involvement in tasks other than managing the activities. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and edited for readability.

In the analysis, we will draw on the interviews with SCLs, as well as with the managers that have been or are SCLs. The empirical material was analysed through a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which provided a productive platform for managing our empirical material. More specifically, this means that we went through all our interview transcripts and observational field notes together in order to familiarise ourselves with the material as a whole, before we started with the coding and categorisation work. One of several themes that came up was the relational work conducted by the SCLs, and the analysis centres on the social relational aspects and how the SCLs talk about their interactions with the participants. By viewing teaching as a social activity, the analysis showed that one important aspect of the SCL relational work with the participants is grounded in the SCLs' own background and their experience of migration, i.e. qualities, and how they draw upon these in their work. We have thematised the findings as 'Mobilisation experiences of migration', 'Acts of balance' and 'When the scale tips over'.

## Analysis

The relational work performed by the SCLs lies at the core of the teaching conducted in the study circle. Our observations and interviews with the SCLs show that the establishment of relations is closely tied in with the SCL's ability to engage in social perspective taking (cf. Gehlbach, 2010), not least in regard to their understanding of the participants' conditions for learning Swedish during the process of seeking asylum. The empirical findings illustrate how the SCLs continuously respond to matters related to the asylum process and the events unfolding in the participants' respective country of origin. Such instances are, on the one hand, regularly present in the study circle conduct, in the SCLs' way of approaching the participants' motivation to study. On the other hand, as will be shown in the following analysis, the SCLs are also trying hard not to let the participants' personal concerns, in terms of the ongoing asylum process, gain the upper hand, not least because their formal job description is solely to organise learning in the study circles.

### *Mobilising experiences of migration*

The analysis shows that the SCLs' background and past experiences have a prominent influence on how the SCLs position themselves in relation to the participants. The SCLs that we have encountered have different backgrounds. All but one of the SCLs have a migrant background, thus having experience of migrating to Sweden and learning the Swedish language. In this group, there are also SCLs who started out as participants in 'Swedish from day 1' that have, so to speak, made a career within ABF. What is characteristic for these individuals is that they are quite motivated to learn Swedish and ABF has fast become their sanctuary. Their efforts were noticed by their SCLs and the management, whereupon they were recruited as interns, received more and more responsibilities and later on became SCLs themselves.

This is why I could learn some Swedish. It was like I said, first I could not speak at all but then Anna-Karin said she saw my struggles. She knew that when I came I could not speak at all but after a couple of months it went well. [...] I then asked her if I could start as an intern and she said yes. (SCL 9)

I told Anna-Karin: 'I can make coffee and clean. And I can sit here and just listen'. That's how I got to be an intern at ABF. You have to sign an agreement, and an intern agreement with the Migration Agency. Then I became an intern for six months. After some time I started to have some circles also, the beginners. That made me learn faster. (Manager 6)

As illustrated in the excerpts, the career path of going from intern to SCL was a rather quick process. One reason was the shortage of SCLs due to the increased numbers of study circles based on the large numbers of asylum seekers during 2015–2016. Some of the SCLs talk about the opportunities they were awarded to start as interns, receiving more responsibility and their journey towards becoming a SCL. As described by these SCLs, such personal qualities, both their experience of being migrants and their knowledge of being participants at ABF, have allowed them to establish credibility among the participants. This, in turn, has made it possible for the SCLs to appear as role models, in the sense of persons that the participants may identify with, not least by sharing their experiences and expressing their understanding of the participants' life situation at large. One SCL describes how SCLs may become role models on the basis of their personal qualities:

I think they saw me as a role model and as a leader. I could also mirror myself in their situation as I have a similar experience to theirs. I worked, applied for asylum and got the chance to stay. These experiences have made working with them easier. (SCL 5)

As described by the SCL, the SCLs seem to become important individuals in the lives of the asylum-seeking participants. As we have illustrated elsewhere (Fejes, Dahlstedt, Mesic & Nyström, 2018), the SCLs are also seen, by the participants themselves, as important not only as teachers in Swedish, but also as important persons that they can trust, share difficulties with and seek social support from. A role with such personal qualities is further accentuated by an SCL, reflecting upon his mission as an SCL: ‘Teachers have an educational background, that we [the SCLs] do not have, but we have *our* experiences’ (SCL 2). Here, the SCL pinpoints a crucial part of the job description of SCLs in general, i.e. they are not teachers in the traditional sense, but rather a more experienced participant leading the circle.

Another aspect of SCLs’ experience that is mobilised and construed as an important personal quality is their mother tongue. In our observations we could also see how SCLs employed their mother tongue as a springboard for participants’ learning, not only in terms of learning the Swedish language, but also about Swedish society in a broader sense. As further elaborated by one of the SCLs:

For those speaking Farsi, this is the right place as the SCL knows Farsi, and thus it becomes easier to introduce... both grammar and also facts, information about society, and so on... I mean, life experience. That you know how things work in Sweden. (SCL 8)

Yet another experience mobilised by the SCLs, and transformed into a personal quality that is useful in the work as a SCL, is the experience of learning the Swedish language, which is used as a means of further stressing the importance of learning the Swedish language for inclusion in Swedish society. As one of the SCLs contends:

I tell the participants that language is the foundation. Living in another country is about communication. So if you cannot communicate, it will be rather difficult to enter society. So it is about communication. Everything revolves around it, otherwise you won’t do anything without communication. My idea [for teaching], the one I know: I relate what has helped me... I have walked that path so I know exactly the way to go. There is only one; no other way. You will have to believe me. (SCL 1)

As indicated by the citation above, in the interviews the SCLs have underlined the importance of their personal experiences of learning Swedish and daring to speak it, as a means of eventually becoming included in Swedish society, precisely as the SCLs themselves have become. Thus, personal experiences are employed by the SCLs as pedagogical tools, as a quality, in motivating participants to learn and speak Swedish. Once more, the SCL is thereby shaped as a role model, i.e. someone who has succeeded in learning Swedish and becoming included in Swedish society, and from whom the participants can learn.

What we have illustrated here is how experience of migration is mobilised and becomes a quality that is useful in creating close relations with participants. Such closeness and ability to employ social perspective taking will potentially create good conditions for learning. However, as we will illustrate in the next section, SCLs constantly need to balance such closeness in order to uphold their role as leaders of the study circles.



### *Balancing acts*

Even though closeness in relations between SCLs and participants might be valuable, there are a range of conditions that make it difficult to handle such closeness. One such condition regards the participants' specific life situation as asylum seekers. With extended waiting periods for a decision on their application for asylum, there are great psychological strains for the participants. This is repeatedly acknowledged by the SCLs, who need to find a balance between wanting to support the participants in their psychological challenges, while at the same time needing to support them in learning the Swedish language. As one SCL argues:

As a person, you have feelings too, but I tend to say: 'Do you have problems? It's not easy to hide, but we'll take it outside the classroom'. Or we may be seated in a room chatting. We try to separate things that have been said: 'Here, we either practice Swedish, or we talk about everything. When we are finished here [in the study circle], we may talk about something else'. That's the way it is. You need to be clear on that, otherwise it won't work. (SCL 5)

Here, we can see how this SCL handles such balancing acts by separating the teaching from the more psychological support. On the one hand, the SCL stresses the importance of upholding the asymmetrical relations between SCL and participants, by defining what can be dealt with, when and where (cf. Aspelin & Persson, 2011). On the other hand, by asking the participants to leave their problems outside the classroom, the SCL indicates how the relations with the participants entail mutual responsibility and considerable emotional commitment on the part of the SCL. Thus, the SCL underlines an intention to continue providing support to the participants, as far as possible, although being well aware of the inability to influence the participants' asylum process.

However, the balancing act of becoming too close to the participants while upholding the asymmetrical relations emerges as a quite challenging endeavour, which is illustrated in interviews as well as in observations. The field note below, taken from one of our observations, exemplifies how such a conflation between the two perspectives can be observed:

// While writing phrases on the blackboard for which participants are invited to underline time adverbials, Manager 1 who today was substituting for a SCL, suddenly remembers an important event and calls out://

Manager 1: Jane, you received your residence permit today! Congratulations!

Jane: Finally, I have waited for two years. (Answers cheerfully)

// Other participants congratulate //

Mahmood: I hope I receive a decision about my case soon, then I can meet my family.

Manager 1: Inshallah [God willing]! (short break) Could you underline the adverb of time?

Here, we can see how the SCL balances between being close while at the same time maintaining the asymmetrical relationship with the participants. First, the SCL acknowledges one of the participants' positive response on an asylum application. But then the teacher refocuses on the teaching task as another participant also expresses his hope for a decision soon. One of the SCLs elaborates on the challenge of balancing between closeness and distance accordingly:

It's not easy. But we do our best, for example in regard to the appeals, contacts with their lawyers [...] It's not so strange that you become affected by it. I myself have been politically active for many years. And the humanistic, well the humane, this thing with empathy, sympathy, has always been a part of me, to sympathise with those who are disadvantaged for one reason or another. That's the reason that I have learned so much: I know how to handle my feelings. [...] You need to have closeness, but at the same time distance as well. (SCL 8)

This is quite elaborate reasoning by the SCL, who refers back to many years of political engagement. The SCL points to the importance of handling one's feelings and finding a balance between being close and distant towards participants. In other words, the experience and ability to handle one's feelings becomes construed as an important personal quality in an SCL working with asylum seekers. In the next section we will further elaborate on such balancing acts by providing three examples where there is risk of the relationship becoming unbalanced.

### *When the scale tips over*

There are several occasions where there is a risk of the relationship between the SCL and the participants becoming either too close or too distant. Or, in other words, where the asymmetrical pedagogical relationship becomes more symmetrical and thus turns into something else, e.g. friendship, guardianship and/or social work (cf. Aspelin & Persson, 2011). Such a shift in the professional relationship entails a transgression of boundaries, where the SCLs take on responsibilities and tasks outside of their role as pedagogical leaders of the study circle.

*Tipping into friendship and community engagement* is one of the ways in which the SCLs transgress their pedagogical mission. The SCLs display considerable social engagement not just with the participants, but also in the local community where the study circles take place, for example by coaching the local football team or working extra at the local library. Such engagement of the SCLs allows for their relations with the participants to reach far outside the classroom. Or as one of the SCLs explains: 'Well, the majority of the participants are my friends as well. I play football with them, I visit them and they come to me' (SCL 5). As illustrated in this quote, for some of the SCLs the boundaries between private and professional engagements may become quite blurred as their teaching becomes intimised (cf. Aspelin & Persson, 2011), e.g. by the development of friendship with the participants. These SCLs maintain that such a close relationship contributes to mutual understanding and trust (cf. Gehlbach, 2010). One of the SCLs expounds further on the matter:

You ought to compare the first week (with) the third week. He starts talking or she starts talking more, laughing, joking around. [...] Then, it may feel as if my son was there. I can relate, or my daughter maybe. [...] It gives me a really nice feeling when I see such people emerge from their isolation. (SCL 6)

*Tipping into guardianship* is another form of mission widening that has been displayed among SCLs. All of them describe how participants persistently approach them with requests to carry out a range of different bureaucratic tasks, such as communication, interpretation and representation in relation to the Migration Agency and other authorities such as health centres and banks. One of the SCLs explains:

One example is that a really long time has passed, the state administrator isn't responding by email or telephone. They may have received a telephone number and may then say [...]

‘Please would you just ask her what has happened with my case?’ I say: ‘You speak English, don’t you’, but they reply: ‘No, please can you...?’ And then we take it. [...] It may be a doctor’s appointment. It may be a visit from the Migration Agency. [...] Then, all you can do is sit and read what they have and try to calm them down. [...] The gratitude you receive is what continues to keep me here. (SCL 6)

As the quote illustrates, tasks other than pedagogical ones are quite common in the everyday work carried out by the SCL. These tasks are also outside of the formal work assigned to the study associations by the State. But still, they are conducted based on the relationships emerging between SCLs and participants in the circles. However, these tasks are mostly done outside the activities within the circle, but they could also be seen as an extension of the object of study and learning since the participants gets the opportunity to learn Swedish at the same time.

Similar to this is the combination of guardianship *tipping into social work*, which relates to the expansion of the mission tasks into what could be understood as a psychologisation of the relationship (cf. Aspelin & Persson, 2011) between the SCLs and the participants. Due to the fact that the participants’ lives become such an integral part of the circles, the relationship between SCLs and participants easily becomes anchored in social work. This becomes evident in cases where participants are expelled from the country or go into hiding from the authorities. The SCLs may in these cases seek to offer emotional stability in the participant’s life through actions such as channelling the person to organisations that may offer protection from the authorities. One of the SCLs explains further:

A person is not so hastily expelled, there is always time to appeal. For a period of time they might keep away [from the study circles] because there is too much to handle, but they tend to return because they appeal the expulsion ruling. Some of them even appeal several times. An appeal might take a really long time. I have had a student whose appeal was rejected six times... They always come to me, wanting a testimonial [for the appeal]. After they receive my testimonial, that may be the last time I see them. I am in contact with most of them by Facebook or Viber or WhatsApp or something else. So I may often send [a message] and ask how it’s going. (SCL 7)

As illustrated in this excerpt, the SCL is supportive in the process of asylum seeking, as well as keeping in contact with some of those who have had their application rejected and are forced to leave the country. So the relationship continues even after the participants have left the circle, or even the country.

In sum, the ability to go to some lengths in supporting asylum seekers inside as well as outside the study circle is construed as an important quality of SCLs working with asylum seekers. However, such a quality can also become a challenge, in that the asymmetrical relationship between leader and participant becomes too intimised.

## Discussion

This article has directed attention towards SCLs and the qualities they mobilise in their work with asylum seekers. The circles are venues in which people of different ages, gender, linguistic and study backgrounds come together to learn Swedish in the spirit of folkbildning as ‘free and voluntary’. The asylum seekers participate without any financial sanctions and through the study circle they have the opportunity to suspend the isolation that many participants explain casts a shadow over the asylum process and the looming

asylum decision. It is in this particular context that the SCLs seek to organise language learning and introduction to Swedish society.

The SCLs are at the centre of the study circle (see e.g. Gustavsson, 2013). In this position, the experiences of the SCLs are mobilised as qualities that help provide opportunities for language learning and support of the participants in their encounter with the new country. Key qualities are the SCLs' experiences of migration, of learning the Swedish language and of settling in Sweden. The value of migration experiences is also emphasised by Colliander (2020) and Rubenstein Reich and Jönsson (2006). In arranging such learning, these qualities have been shown to incur participants' trust, and on the basis of these experiences the SCLs often view themselves, and are seen by the participants, as role models. These findings are in line with Edström's (2014) results where a competent SCL is someone who can engage the participants and also share one's knowledge and experience. This can also be interpreted as the SCLs – by employing such qualities in their daily professional work – having an ability to perform social perspective taking (SPT). In line with Gehlbach (2010), this ability may be viewed as supporting and strengthening their position as leaders of these particular circles because the SCLs can view the world from the perspective of the participant and in such a way be better equipped in helping the participants to learn.

However, the ability to employ SPT brings several challenges. The analysis illustrates how being an SCL is a demanding task which often becomes a balancing act in which one has to be a pedagogical leader at the same time as not allowing social aspects external to the circle to take over. Here, the SCLs emphasise that they take measures to ensure that language learning remains the focus, by attempting to consign conversations relating to the personal migration process to the margins of the classroom.

As a consequence of their own experience of migration and of becoming settled in Sweden, the SCLs express difficulties in distancing the state of the participants from their own experiences. In line with Gehlbach (2010), we argue that the SCLs, in some respects, extend their ability for SPT far beyond the learning mission of the study circle. As presented above, the SCLs' relationships with the participants tend to become channelled into another set of relationships, most clearly in the form of *friendship*, *guardianship* or *social work*. The reason for such mission extension is not solely anchored in SCLs' SPT and their experiences of Sweden, i.e. their personal qualities, but also in the realities of the migration process that the participants experience in their daily lives and bring to the table in the classroom. This raises questions concerning whether it may be considered unfavourable for the participants if the SCLs make such a leap.

From the perspective of Aspelin and Persson (2011), the relationship between the teacher and the pupil is acknowledged for its asymmetrical features, which means that the teacher has been a pupil and thus may adjust the pedagogical interventions in line with such experiences. As mentioned above, in this specific context we have also identified a productive 'social force' related to the asymmetry. Such a relationship between the SCL and the participants could, in line with Aspelin and Person (2011), be seen as a psychologisation or intimisation that tends to detract from the pedagogical mission. However, due to the specific circumstances in which the participants find themselves, the study circle is appreciated by the participants as a place of stability where not least the SCLs serve a crucial role in dealing with the precarious situation of the participants as asylum seekers. The pedagogical leap into a variety of social aspects of the participants' lives is highly valued (as also reported in our previous studies, cf. Fejes, Dahlstedt, Mesic & Nyström, 2018).

In this research, we have seen that both the participants and the ABF organisation value the SCLs with experiences of migration, as these are turned into personal qualities

that are important for the job as an SCL. The organisational position is visible in that a large majority of SCLs are hand-picked. They are not solely selected for their pedagogical and language skills, but also to serve as ‘migrant role models’ who are receptive to the participants’ precariousness and in a way represent what it means and takes to succeed in Sweden.

However, even though we have been able to illustrate how personal qualities of a specific kind become important in the support of adult asylum seekers, there are also inherent risks in mobilising such qualities. Firstly, referring to Osman (2013), the kind of work carried out in study circles targeting migrants’ risks producing an archetypal form of citizen that may ‘fall into line [...] as a caricatural image of immigrants’ (Osman, 2013, p. 164-165). And secondly, with experiences of migration becoming transformed into personal qualities construed as important in the work of the SCL as a role model for asylum seekers, there is a risk of ontology becoming conflated with epistemology (cf. Skeggs, 1997). In other words, the emergence of norms suggesting that only migrants can teach migrants. Such an argument is obviously problematic, as it suggests that all individuals of a certain collective are alike.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The project has undergone ethical vetting and been approved (Dnr 2017/280-31).

## References

- Andersson, E. (2001). *Cirkelledarskapet - en enkät och intervjustudie med cirkelledare* [Study circle leadership - a survey and interview study with study circle leaders]. Stockholm: Folkbildningsrådet.
- Aspelin, J., & Persson, S. (2010). *Om relationell pedagogik* [Relational pedagogy]. Malmö: Gleerups.
- Bergström, M. Bernerstedt, E. Edström, & J. Krih (Eds.), *Cirkelledare – folkbildningens fotfolk och drivkraft* [Circle leaders - the infantry and the driving force of popular education]. Stockholm: Folkbildningsrådet.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Colliander, H. (2020). Building bridges and strengthening positions: Exploring the identity construction of immigrant bilingual teachers. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 23(6), 695-707. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2017.1400516>
- Dahlstedt, M. (2009). *Aktiveringens politik: Demokrati och medborgarskap för ett nytt millennium* [The politics of activation: Democracy and citizenship for a new millennium]. Malmö: Liber.
- Edquist, S. (2009). *En folklig historia* [A popular history]. Umeå: Boréa.
- Edström, E. (2014). En kompetent cirkelledare - vad är det? [A competent circle leader - what is that?] In Y. Bergström, M. Bernerstedt, E. Edström, & J. Krih (Eds.), *Cirkelledare – folkbildningens fotfolk och drivkraft* [Circle leaders - the infantry and the driving force of popular education] (pp. 59-81). Stockholm: Folkbildningsrådet.
- Fejes, A. (2019). Adult education and the fostering of asylum seekers into potential 'full' citizens. *International Review of Education*, 65(2), 233-250.
- Fejes, A. & Dahlstedt, M. (2017). Popular education, migration and a discourse on inclusion. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 49(2), 214-227. Doi: 10.1080/02660830.2018.1463656
- Fejes, A., Aman, R., Dahlstedt, M., Gruber, S., & Nyström, S. (2018). *Introduktion på svenska: Om språkintröduktion för nyanlända på gymnasieskola och folkhögskola* [Introduction in Swedish: About language introduction for newly arrived students in upper secondary school and folk highschool]. Linköping: Linköping University Electronic Press.
- Fejes, A., Dahlstedt, M., Mešić, N., & Nyström, S. (2018). *Svenska(r) från dag 1: En studie av ABFs arbete med asylsökande* [Swedes from day 1: A study of ABFs work with asylum seekers]. Stockholm: ABF.

- Flowers, R. (2009). *Traditions of popular education*. Report Zeitschrift fuer Weiterbildungsforschung, 32, 9–22.
- Gehlbach, H. (2010). The social side of school: Why teachers need social psychology. *Educational psychology review*, 22, 349-362.
- Gustavsson, B. (2013). The idea of democratic building: Its transformations in time and space. In A.-M. Laginder, H. Nordvall, & J. Crowther (Eds.), *Popular education, power and democracy: Swedish experiences and contributions* (pp. 35–49). Leicester, UK: NIACE.
- Kane, L. (2012). Comparing Popular and State education in Latin America and Europe. *European journal for research on the education and learning of adults*, 4(1), 81-96.
- Micheletti, M. (1995). *Civil society and state relations in Sweden*. Aldershot: Avebury.
- Osman, A. (1999). *The 'Strangers' among us: The social construction of identity in adult education*. Linköping: Linköping University.
- Osman, A. (2013). Popular education in the service of integration: Empowerment or internalisation of the dominant cultural ethos? In A-M Laginder, H. Nordvall and J. Crowther (Eds.), *Popular education, Power and Democracy* (pp. 147-168). Niace: Leicester.
- Premfors, R. (2000). *Den starka demokratin* [The strong democracy]. Stockholm: Atlas.
- Rubenstein Reich, L., & Jönsson, A. (2006). Invandrade lärares arbetssituation och läraridentitet - efter fyra år som lärare i den svenska skolan [Migrant teachers work situation and teacher identity – after four years as teachers in the Swedish school]. *Educare*, 2, 66–107.
- SFS 2015:218. Förordning (2015:218) om statsbidrag till folkbildningen.
- Skeggs, B. (1997). *The formation of class and gender. Becoming respectable*. Thousand oaks: Sage publications.
- Swedish Government. (2017). *Prop. 2017/18:1. Government budget 2018. Expenditure area 17, Culture, media, religious community and leisure time*. Stockholm: Swedish Government.
- Swedish National Council of Adult Education. (2020). *Folkbildning in Sweden*. Retrieved June 20, 2020 from [https://www.folkbildningsradet.se/globalassets/oversattningar/oversattning\\_webb\\_final\\_uppdaterad-2016.pdf](https://www.folkbildningsradet.se/globalassets/oversattningar/oversattning_webb_final_uppdaterad-2016.pdf)
- The Migration Agency. (2020). *Asylsökande till Sverige under 2000-2019* [Asylum seekers to Sweden 2000-2019]. Retrieved June 22, 2020, from <https://www.migrationsverket.se/download/18.4a5a58d51602d141cf41003/1580829370314/Asylsökande%20till%20Sverige%202000-2019.pdf>