



Article

# Constructing the ‘Diversity Problem:’ Policy Evolution and Educational Approaches in Norwegian Immigration Discourse (2015 - 2025)

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## Abstract

This article explores how Norwegian governmental discourse constructs diversity as a policy problem across immigration, integration, and educational domains, revealing fundamental contradictions that position teachers as *unwilling mitigators* of state-produced tensions between inclusion and exclusion. Eight policy documents and one government webpage published between 2015 and 2025 are analyzed, tracing three phases of problem construction across immigration, integration, and educational policy. The analysis reveals how the same government simultaneously mandates that teachers support students in maintaining their identities within inclusive environments while requiring those students to conform to Norwegian values – including implicitly held social norms – within a society that has not fully admitted them. This article explores how this contradiction intensifies when examining how the government produces racialized welfare stigma while mandating teachers combat racism. I argue that this is not policy incoherence but rather a constitutive feature of late liberal governance, one that makes democratic education structurally impossible and positions teachers to fail at ameliorating inequalities that the policy system itself creates. The findings have implications for how we understand teacher agency, democratic education, and the limits of peace and human rights education in late liberal welfare states.

**Keywords:** immigration policy, integration, democratic education, Norway, late liberalism



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## Introduction

Norway ranks first among all nations in per capita contributions to official development assistance – money given out without conditions to support humanitarian needs abroad (Helliwell et al., 2025). It was also ranked among the top ten happiest countries in the world in 2025 and holds the highest possible classification on the Varieties of Democracy index as a “Liberal Democracy” (Helliwell et al., 2025; V-Dem Institute, 2025). It maintains one of the world’s most expansive welfare states and a public education system legally mandated to ensure that every student, regardless of background, experiences dignity, inclusion, and democratic participation as a lived practice (Education Act, 2023; Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). These facts are consistent with Norway’s long cultivated identity as a “peace nation” (Leira, 2013; Pisarska, 2016) – a country whose international self-presentation centers on humanitarian commitment, conflict resolution, and human rights.

Yet between 2015 and 2025, the same Norwegian government that exports these values produced a domestic immigration discourse describing asylum seekers as a fiscal burden and positioning their welfare use as especially concerning when differences were marked by ethnicity (Meld. St. 30 (2015-2016)). During that period, Prime Minister Erna Solberg announced “absolutely necessary restrictions” to ensure “sustainable” asylum policy (Regjeringen.no, 2015). The word “sustainable” used in this context does particular political work. It frames immigration not as a humanitarian obligation but as a threat to an equilibrium that must be defended.

The contradiction between what the government asks of immigrants and what it asks of teachers becomes particularly acute in the classroom. Norwegian teachers are legally bound, through the Core Curriculum and the Education Act, to help each student to “preserve and develop” their identity in “inclusive and diverse” environments, to ensure no student is “subjected to discrimination,” and to actively combat antisemitism and anti-Muslim racism (Education Act, 2023; Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 5). These are binding mandates that require the fostering of an egalitarian and inclusive educational space. At the same time, the immigration and integration policies shaping those same students’ lives construct diversity as a problem requiring management, positioning immigrant families as burdens on the welfare state, and requiring that students “embrace Norwegian values including the unwritten rules” of a society they are still only “becoming part of” (Meld. St. 17(2023-2024), p. 9). Teachers are expected to facilitate dialogue about equity and inclusion while the policy environment simultaneously subjects students’ families to deportation proceedings, temporary legal status, and increasingly restrictive family reunification requirements (Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2025; Schultz, 2025). This points to the asymmetry between educational and immigration policy domains, and this article explores how divergent language constructs this misalignment.

I aim to explore how teachers teach dignity and foster respect for diversity while their government produces and perpetuates stigma. How do they dismantle prejudice when state discourse fuels it with written policy? These are not questions with pedagogical solutions, but instead questions about structural conditions. I argue that Norwegian teachers are positioned as unwilling mitigators, assigned responsibility for managing social fractures that the state itself creates. This may not be a matter of improved teacher training, increased resources, or more enthusiastic commitment. It is potentially a structural feature of how Norwegian government discourse operations across integration, immigration, and education domains simultaneously.

Scholars have extensively examined restrictive immigration discourse (Wodak, 2015; Wodak & Forchtner, 2021) and educational inclusion policies separately (Banks, 2019; Sleeter, 2017). Few studies in English have systematically analyzed how these policy domains produce contradictory constructions of the same students, and what that contradiction makes impossible for the teachers who work with them. This article contributes to this scholarship by exploring how Norwegian policy discourse has constructed diversity as a “problem” across immigration, integration, and educational policy domains (2015-2025), and what contradictions it may be creating for educators mandated to promote democratic inclusion.

## Literature Review

Scholars working specifically within Nordic contexts have documented the gap between human rights education policy frameworks and classroom realities, finding that despite formal commitments to democratic and rights-based education, structural conditions frequently constrain what is pedagogically possible in practice (Osler & Skarra, 2021; Vesterdal, 2019). This gap is particularly acute when educational mandates call for what Westheimer and Kahne (2004) describe as justice-oriented citizenship – a form of democratic participation that requires students to interrogate structural conditions and work toward systemic change – while those very structural conditions are actively produced by other arms of the same government issuing the educational mandate. Osler and Goldschmidt-Gjerløw (2024) observe that across the Nordic region, human rights principles are centrally positioned in official discourse without necessarily being reflected in practice, and that this disjuncture demands critical scrutiny rather than the assumption that democratic values in policy documents translate automatically into democratic conditions in schools. This article explores what that disjuncture looks like in the Norwegian case and identifies the policy mechanism that produces it.

Drawing on Povinelli’s (2011) theory of late liberal governance, I show that the contradiction is constitutive of late liberal social order – Norway’s inclusive schools and robust welfare state are not undermined by restrictive immigration policy and exclusionary discourse – they are, in a structural sense, enabled by them.

Many educational initiatives related to peace, democratic and human rights education focus on pedagogical methods, individual emotional development, or institutional design, and fail to address the structural conditions that constrain what is pedagogically possible in the first place (Kruger & Zembylas, 2023; Zembylas & Keet, 2018). Those structural conditions are the primary object of this discourse analysis.

The terms “immigration” and “immigrant” will be broadly used in this article to cover migrants who have arrived in Norway because they have chosen to immigrate, as well as those who have sought asylum. While the lived experience of these groups varies substantially (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018), the purpose here is to examine how governmental discourse positions foreign nationals as a category in Norway, and how that positioning produces consequences for educators regardless of the migration pathway involved.

The next section presents the theoretical framework, drawing on Bacchi’s poststructuralist framework (2009) and Povinelli’s (2011) late liberal governance theory to conceptualize teachers as ‘unwilling mitigators’. Then I will describe the methodology, including document selection and the coding process using WPR to operationalize a coding framework. Next, the core contradiction is explored through a comparison on education and integration policy language. I will go on to trace three phases of problem construction across the period between 2015 and 2025 and then discuss the implications for democratic education and importantly, teacher positioning in late liberal societies. The article will conclude with the argument that teachers will remain structurally positioned to fail at tasks assigned by the same system that makes them impossible through a constitutive, late liberal discourse function to maintain the status quo.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is Carol Bacchi’s (2009) poststructuralist framework for policy analysis, known as “What’s the Problem Represented to Be?” (WPR). For Bacchi, policies do not respond to problems that exist independently of the social world. Departing from conventional policy evaluation, which asks whether a policy achieves stated goals, WPR asks a more fundamental question: How does a policy actively construct the problem it aims to resolve? The representational choices embedded in policy language shape what solutions appear rational, which subjects are positioned as needing intervention, and what alternatives remain unproblematized (Bacchi, 2009).

Bacchi draws on Foucault’s concept of problematization, using the term as both a method of analysis and the historical process through which a phenomenon is produced as an object of thought (Foucault, 1977). With this framing, Foucault explores how an issue is positioned and how it might be shaped in order to understand how and why certain behaviors, phenomena, and processes become problematic (Bacchi, 2012). The WPR approach broadens Foucault’s focus, looking beyond historical crisis points and arguing that all contemporary policy proposals rely on problematizations that can be opened up for critical scrutiny

(Bacchi, 2012). Bacchi operationalizes this critique through six analytical questions that together constitute a systematic method for examining what policy constructs, what it assumes, what it silences, and what effects it produces. This process is described in more detail later and forms the basis for the coding framework applied across all documents analyzed in this study. The analytical payoff of applying these questions systematically across policy domains, and what they reveal about how the same governmental apparatus constructs the same subjects differently depending on context, is developed in the findings that follow.

To interpret what the WPR analysis reveals, not just as policy inconsistency but as structural logic – I draw on Elizabeth Povinelli’s (2011) theory of late liberal governance. Povinelli argues that contemporary liberal societies manage social difference through a characteristic double standard – the public performance of inclusion, tolerance, and progressive values alongside the maintenance of exclusionary practices that are structurally necessary for the public performance of inclusion, tolerance, and progressive values alongside the maintenance of exclusionary practices that are structurally necessary for the social order those values claim to describe. It is something more durable and is instead a constitutive relationship in which visible care for some depends on (hidden) violence against others.

Povinelli draws on LeGuin’s (1973) parable “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” in which a utopian city’s collective happiness is sustained by the ongoing suffering of a child kept in a dark, windowless basement room. The city’s residents know about the child, and while some walk away, most stay and find ways to accommodate the knowledge. The point is not that the city is hypocritical – it is that the happiness is structurally organized around the child’s suffering, and eliminating the suffering would require dismantling the mechanism that supports their happiness and prosperity. The relationship is not incidental, but instead is constitutive (Povinelli, 2011).

Applied to the Norwegian case, Povinelli’s (2011) framework offers a productive analytical lens for examining what might otherwise appear as simple policy incoherence. Rather than asking whether Norway’s immigration and educational policies contradict each other – they plainly do – the framework directs attention toward the structural logic that makes such contradictions not only possible but necessary. It allows the analysis to ask not, “why does Norway contradict itself between these two institutions?”, but rather, “what work does this apparent contradiction perform, and for whom?” This reframing is particularly well-suited to the Norwegian case, where the coexistence of a formally inclusive public education system and a formally exclusionary immigration regime is not anomalous but characteristic – a configuration that demands a theoretical framework capable of holding both dimensions in view simultaneously without resolving the tension prematurely.

These two theoretical frameworks together generate the conceptual contribution of this article. The concept of teachers as unwilling mitigators requires careful distinction, however, from these frameworks. Drawing on Coburn's (2004) reconceptualization of institutional influence, this research explores what an educator must navigate between restrictive immigration discourse and educational mandates emphasizing democracy, inclusion, and human dignity (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). This is an extension of Lipsky's (2010) theory of street-level bureaucracy positioning teachers and other public servants as ground-level implementers who exercise discretionary judgment in translating policy into practice – often in ways that diverge from the original (or official) intent. While teachers exercise agency in how they implement policy, their decisions are not entirely free but constrained by deep-seated, often preconscious assumptions about teaching and learning, as well as by the specific nature of the policy messages they receive (Lipsky, 2010). Coburn (2004) calls this “bounded autonomy.” Both frameworks recognize that teachers are constrained by the institutional environments they inhabit and that their responses to policy are neither purely compliant nor purely resistant.

The idea of teachers as unwilling mitigators builds on these insights but makes a stronger and structurally different claim. Street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 2010) and bounded autonomy (Coburn, 2004) describe teachers as constrained actors – people whose agency is limited by institutional structures. Lipsky (2010) recognized that street-level bureaucrats do not merely face constraints but experience genuine dilemmas – tensions between competing institutional demands and their felt obligations to the individuals they serve, tensions that they navigate through discretionary judgement in the absence of adequate resources or clear policy guidance. Teachers in the Norwegian context experience something structurally similar. They feel the pull between what immigration discourse constructs their students to be and what educational mandate requires them to become.

The concept of unwilling mitigators, however, makes a stronger claim than Lipsky's dilemma framework allows. Where Lipsky's street-level bureaucrats face dilemmas that are in principle resolvable (through things like better policy design, more resources, or more sophisticated professional judgement), unwilling mitigators face a contradiction that is constitutive of the policy system itself. The dilemma cannot be navigated because its resolution would require dismantling the structural logic on which the system depends. Unwilling mitigator describes the teacher as structurally positioned to fail – someone assigned responsibility for managing contradictions that are not incidental to the policy system but essential to how it functions. This goes beyond better training, more resources, or stronger professional commitment. Within the discursive conditions this article explores, no amount of pedagogical development can equip teachers to simultaneously preserve immigrant students' identities and facilitate their assimilation into Norwegian values. Furthermore, if policy language normalizes the conditions of inequality, teachers cannot be expected to make students feel equal, nor can they dismantle the prejudices that state discourse

fosters. The impossibility is structural and discursively produced – not contingent on individual teacher capacity or commitment.

The ‘unwilling’ dimension of the concept deserves specific attention. The educators responsible for enacting the core curriculum did not choose this position, they do not embrace it, and the logic of their situation invites resistance – as the author’s ongoing ethnographic fieldwork with Norwegian K-12 teachers has suggested, even where that resistance cannot resolve contradictions at the level of policy structure. The mitigator dimension names what the state expects of them – to soften, manage, and absorb the social fractures that restrictive immigration discourse produces, while the educational mandate frames this as a simple democratic pedagogy. The extent to which this structural logic operates across Norwegian policy domains – and what it makes impossible for educators – is what the following analysis seeks to explore.

## Methodology

This study analyzes eight Norwegian policy documents and one government-maintained website spanning immigration, integration, and education domains between 2015 and 2025, with the most recent document the Introduction Programme (Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion, 2026) updated in early 2026. The selection of documents was guided by three criteria: documents must represent official government positions (not NGO, media, or academic sources); they had to be available in English as officially published by the Norwegian government, not as researcher translations; and they had to span both the education and immigration/integration domains in order to enable the cross-domain comparison that is central to this analysis. Restricting the corpus to government documents was a deliberate methodological choice, ensuring the contradictions identified are internal to the same governmental apparatus – not tensions between state and civil society positions. Table 1 represents the full document list organized by policy category.

**Table 1.** Policy documents included in analysis

| Document Name                                                                                   | Date      | Policy Category |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|-----------------|
| Education Act (2023)                                                                            | 2023      | Education       |
| Core Curriculum (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017)                                      | 2017      | Education       |
| Action Plan Against Antisemitism (Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development. (2025) | 2025-2030 | Education       |
| Action Plan on Racism and Discrimination (Arbeids- og                                           | 2024-2027 | Education       |

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 inkluderingsdepartementet, 2024)

|                                                                                                                                        |                |             |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|-------------|
| Action Plan to Combat Anti-Muslim Racism (Ministry of Culture and Equality, 2025)                                                      | 2025-2030      | Education   |
| White paper no 17 (2023-2024): On integration policy: Set requirements and show up (Meld. St. 17 (2023-2024))                          | 2023-2024      | Immigration |
| Introduction Programme (Ministry of Labor and Social Inclusion, 2026)                                                                  | 2026 (updated) | Immigration |
| White paper no 30 (2015-2016): From reception centre to the labour market – an effective integration policy (Meld. St. 30 (2015-2016)) | 2015-2016      | Immigration |
| Asylum Timeline (Necessary Tightening Efforts & Measures) <sup>1</sup> (Regjeringen.no, 2015)                                          | 2015-2016      | Asylum      |

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The temporal frame begins in 2015, which functions as a watershed moment in Norwegian immigration discourse. The arrival of more than 31,000 asylum seekers that year – unprecedented in a country of just over five million people – prompted an emergency response (Parveen, 2020) and marked a shift in discursive register toward crisis, restriction, and control (Hagelund, 2020). Including documents from this period captures the initial construction of diversity as a problem, against which the subsequent evolution of integration and policy documents can be read. This analysis focuses on major policy statements (Meld. St. 30 (2015-2016); Meld. St. 17 (2023-2024)) and key action plans that articulate the government's stated commitments to combating racism and antisemitism, alongside foundational educational legislation: Education Act (2023) and the Core Curriculum (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017).

The sheer volume of Norwegian policy documentation on immigration and integration between 2015 and 2025 itself warrants methodological comment. Multiple iterations of antisemitism action plans, repeated revisions to integration policy, and overlapping jurisdictions across ministries suggest a governance approach characterized by continuous symbolic document production. This proliferation was both a challenge for corpus construction and a finding in its own right - one that informs the analysis of how the Norwegian state manages its contradictions through repetitive restatement and revision rather than resolution.

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<sup>1</sup> The analysis includes a Norwegian government webpage maintained by the Prime Minister's Office providing a chronological overview of policy measures taken during the 2015-2016 asylum situation. It exists as a living government webpage.

## Data Analysis

Applied systematically across government policy documents and websites spanning immigration, integration, and educational domains from 2015-2025, the WPR framework traces three phases of problem construction and their cumulative effects on what becomes possible – and impossible – in the Norwegian classroom. Each document was analyzed using Bacchi's (2009) six WPR analytical questions as an organizing framework for systematic coding in MAXQDA. The six questions ask: what is the problem represented to be; what presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation; how has this representation come about historically; what is left unproblematicized or silenced; what effects does this representation produce; and how is the representation defended and how might it be disrupted or replaced?

A code system of over seventy codes organized across these six questions was developed prior to analysis, following an a priori deductive coding approach (Saldaña, 2021), with additional analytical memos written throughout to document emergent patterns and contradictions across documents. Each document was then coded sequentially, beginning with the 2015-2016 asylum policy timeline, moving into the current immigration/integration policy, and then finishing with the educational mandates and action plans. This sequence was intentional, as coding the restrictive discourse first established a baseline problem framing against which the educational mandates could be read as counter-discourse – and against which the action plans, which occupy an uneasy position between both domains, could be analyzed as the site where the contradiction becomes most visible.

## Researcher Positionality

This analysis is conducted from a situated position that warrants explicit acknowledgement, as it is informed by the ethnographic fieldwork I have engaged in over the last two years. As an American researcher affiliated with Norwegian educational institutions who conducts ongoing fieldwork with Norwegian teachers on peace and democratic education, I bring both familiarity and distance to this material. Familiarity in the sense that my fieldwork has made the structural conditions described here visible and legible in ways that shaped my analytical attention – I did not arrive at these policy documents without prior interpretive frameworks already in formation as an insider. Distance in the sense that my outsider position as a non-Norwegian researcher means I read these documents without the normalization that can accompany long-term immersion in a national policy context. Both dimensions carry risk. The familiarity risks over-reading teacher constraint in ways that reflect my own theoretical commitments to critical peace education rather than the full range of teacher responses to these conditions. The distance risks missing the contextual nuances that Norwegian scholars and practitioners would immediately recognize. I have attempted to manage these risks through systematic application of the WPR framework,

which disciplines interpretive attention toward the policy text itself rather than toward assumed effects, and through ongoing engagement with Norwegian scholarship on integration, migration, and education throughout the analytical process.

## Limitations

While an extensive discourse analysis of educational and immigration policy provides an understanding of how diversity resulting from migration is framed as a problem, a discourse analysis alone cannot capture teacher experiences. This research focuses on policy text, not necessarily on how policy is implemented, setting up the need for further research that includes teacher perspectives. Government documents reveal how the state constructs and positions its subjects but cannot capture how teachers navigate these constructions in practice or how school communities develop local strategies of accommodation or resistance. The policy level is where structural contradiction this article examines is produced. Additional studies are needed that examine teacher experiences navigating policy discourse in their classrooms while simultaneously enacting educational mandates that promote diversity and inclusion.

Further, the WPR (Bacchi, 2009) framework I selected is only one way to perform discourse analysis. A different analysis framework would likely produce different results and focus on different aspects of these policies, and other policy documents may produce alternative findings. As a researcher exploring how teachers experience peace and democratic education principles in their classrooms, I found the WPR framework was most suitable to uncover underlying assumptions related to the inclusion of difference in classroom environments and directly connect to how teachers discuss difference in their classrooms.

## Findings

The systematic application of Bacchi's (2009) WPR framework across nine Norwegian government documents spanning 2015-2025 produced two overarching analytical findings. First, when immigration, integration, and educational policy documents are read together rather than in isolation, they reveal a fundamental and irresolvable contradiction in how the same government constructs the same students – both as conditional members requiring management and as rights-bearing pupils deserving dignity and inclusion. Second, this contradiction is not static. It has evolved discursively across the decade under exploration, intensifying in ways that progressively narrow what is pedagogically possible for teachers who are mandated to enact democratic education. These two findings are developed in the sections that follow.

The first is established through a cross-domain comparison and educational and policy language. The second is traced through three distinct phases of problem construction: Crisis and restriction (2015-2018), individual deficit framing (2019 – 2023), and intensification and precarity (2022-2025). Each of these builds

on and extends the logic of the previous phase while adding new discursive mechanisms that deepen the structural impossibility teachers face in their classrooms.

### **Establishing the Core Contradiction**

When analyzed together, immigration and educational policy documents reveal a government mechanism that constructs immigrant students and their families simultaneously as burdens and conditional members (Meld. St. 30 (2015-2016); Meld. St. 17 (2023-2024)) while mandating their treatment as rights-bearing pupils deserving of dignity and inclusion (Education Act, 2023; Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). Holding these constructions side-by-side rather than examining each in isolation is precisely what WPR enables. When Norwegian integration policy positions dependency on “government handouts concerning, especially when the differences follow ethnic lines” (Meld. St. 30 (2015-2016), p. 9) without any structural analysis of labor market discrimination or credential non-recognition, the absence itself is analytically significant. WPR asks not just what is said, but whose interests are served by what is not.

### **What Educational Policy Mandates**

A reading of foundational educational policy in Norway published between 2015 and 2025 reveals a focus on democracy as a lived practice – not just an abstract concept (Biesta, 2007; Dewey, 2001). Across educational policy documents, diversity is positioned as a strength and a condition of good schooling rather than a challenge requiring management. The Core Curriculum (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017) establishes this mandate through very specific language, and an examination using the WPR approach reveals not only what is being communicated, but what is being left out. On page 7 of the core curriculum it states, “School shall give pupils historical and cultural insight that will give them a good foundation in their lives and help each pupil to preserve and develop her or his identity in an inclusive and diverse environment.” This emphasizes “each pupil” as already being enough – they are encouraged to preserve and develop their existing identity. Diverse and inclusive environments are considered valuable and are the starting point, not a problem, positioned as a positive attribute of Norwegian society.

### **What Immigration and Integration Policy Construct**

Integration policy, however, introduces contradictory language that destabilizes exactly these assumptions. Meld. St. 17 (2023-2024) states that “Integration policy shall contribute to immigrants gaining insight into and embracing the fundamental values enshrined in both legislation and the written and unwritten rules of the society they are becoming part of” (p. 11). The contrast with the Core Curriculum is striking, and analytically powerful. Where the curriculum speaks of “each pupil,” integration policy speaks of “immigrants” – a marked category that does not yet fully belong (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Where the curriculum

mandates identity preservation, integration policy mandates embracing Norwegian values. Where the curriculum positions diversity as a positive feature of the learning environment, integration policy positions it as a condition requiring management through assimilation. And where the curriculum language is unconditional – every pupil, no exceptions – integration policy is explicitly conditional. Belonging is something immigrants are striving to achieve, not something they already have. The question WPR directs us to ask is not merely whether those two documents contradict each other – they plainly do – but what that contradiction makes possible and what it makes impossible (Bacchi, 2009). For teachers, it makes the simultaneous fulfillment of both mandates structurally unmanageable.

## **The Action Plan Paradox**

The contradiction is increasingly apparent when the action plans against antisemitism (Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion, 2024; Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, 2025) and anti-Muslim racism (Ministry of Culture, 2020; Ministry of Culture and Equality, 2025) are brought into view alongside the immigration policy documents. The government mandates teachers actively combat antisemitism and anti-Muslim racism not only to avoid discriminatory behavior, but to break down the conditions that produce it. These are legal obligations intended to serve as more than just guidelines. Yet immigration discourse analyzed in the following section constructs asylum seekers – a population predominately from the regions most affected by the 2015 crisis – as fiscal burdens, cultural threats, and conditional members of Norwegian society. Democratic education becomes structurally impossible when immigration policy produces the very group focused enmities (Allport, 1958) that educational mandates expect teachers to undo. The three phases of problem construction that follow document how this contradiction develops, intensifies, and ultimately becomes structurally self-sustaining across a decade of Norwegian policy.

## **Three Phases of Problem Construction**

### **Phase I: Crisis and Restriction (2015 - 2018)**

Understanding the historical context is essential in framing the contemporary moment in both Norwegian education and immigration policy. What has been described as the 2015 European “refugee crisis” has been documented in the literature (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018; Kalsdóttir et al., 2018; Parveen, 2020) and is where this investigation into the evolution of the “diversity problem” begins. Between 2015 and 2018, Europe experienced one of the largest periods of movement of people since World War II (Hagelund, 2020; Parveen, 2020). Migration was a result of many simultaneous events, but was primarily due to the ongoing unrest in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq (Parveen, 2020). Norway received more than 31,000 asylum applications in 2015, prompting an urgent governmental response and a sharp rhetorical shift toward crisis,

restriction, and management (Parveen, 2020). Prime Minister Solberg calls for "absolutely necessary restrictions to ensure a more sustainable asylum policy" (Regjeringen Solberg, 2016, para. 3), emphasized sustainability and control. It is this moment when explicit burden framing enters Norwegian governmental discourse in new ways and sets up everything that follows.

The word 'crisis' does specific political work (Schierup et al., 2006). Immigration policy during this period used language describing a 'historic influx' requiring restriction and 'sustainable' asylum policy (Regjeringen Solberg, 2016), framing the Norwegian welfare state as an equilibrium that immigration threatens to destabilize — positioning restriction not as a political choice but as a structural necessity. This framing naturalizes exclusion (Wodak & Forchtner, 2021), positioning it as necessary to the overall functioning of the idyllic state (Povinelli, 2011).

Meld. St. 30 (2015-2016) provides evidence of what this naturalization produces. It states, "a greater proportion of the population being dependent on government handouts raises concerns, especially when the differences follow ethnic lines" (p. 9). WPR directs attention first to the language itself. The word "handouts" creates an imaginary centered in stigmatization (Handler & Hasenfeld, 2008; Wacquant, 2009) and explicitly racializes poverty through the reference to "ethnic lines." Poverty among immigrants is positioned as qualitatively different from, and more concerning than, poverty among native Norwegians. The same document extends this logic where increased migration and asylum requests are described as "financially and socially negative for both the individual and their family, and at the same time results in lower tax revenues and increased pressure on the welfare system" (p. 9).

This logic is documented by Bendixsen and Eriksen (2024) in their study of irregular migrants — those who remain in Norway following rejection of asylum claims — and how it measurably shaped how the Norwegian welfare state manages those outside its boundaries of formal belonging in practice. Bacchi's (2009) analytical framework allows us to see not just what is being said, but how the language constructs the "diversity as a problem" narrative. By attributing socio-economic marginalization to the personal traits or cultural backgrounds of marginalized people, the state effectively shields its own economic systems and racist institutions from critique (Razack, 2004).

What WPR reveals here is not only what is said but what is left unsaid. Bacchi (2009) would prompt us to consider what aspects are not being addressed and who stands to gain from this specific framing of the problem. There is no structural analysis in these documents of why immigrants disproportionately draw on welfare support. No examination of labor market discrimination, credential non-recognition, insufficient language training provision, or the documented barriers that prevent qualified immigrants from accessing employment commensurate with their skills (Midtbøen & Rogstad, 2012). The problem is located entirely

within the immigrant population, and the question of Norwegian structural responsibility is not raised. This silence forecloses the kinds of solutions (anti-discrimination enforcement, credential recognition reform, labor market access) that would require institutions to change rather than immigrant populations to adapt. For teachers, this phase produces a specific pedagogical impossibility. They are expected to affirm the dignity and equal worth of students whose families the government is simultaneously and explicitly stigmatizing in its official communications (Zembylas & Keet, 2018).

## **Phase II: Immigrants as Individually Deficient (2019 - 2023)**

There is a clear shift in discourse during the period between 2019-2023, and “crisis” framing turns to an “integration challenge” and the burden on the welfare state experienced by an increasing refugee population is re-framed through a deficit narrative. The same logic exists, but the change in language appears to be progressive at first glance. It is here we begin to see the turn toward acknowledgement of the existence of racism and discrimination in Norway – but what is missing is the lack of agency and accountability on the part of Norwegian society. Stigmatization appears through language of concern.

Moving to the government white paper titled “On integration policy: Set requirements and show up” (Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2024), this shift in language is evident. Here it states “Immigrants must feel that they face the same expectations and are given the same opportunities as everyone else” (p. 165). Indicating that immigrants “must feel” (instead of “must have”) shifts the realities of material equality to a perceived equality, locating the problem as a misperception, and places any measure to ameliorate inequality on how immigrants ‘feel’ about their position in Norwegian society (Ahmed, 2012). Teachers are positioned to make students feel equal – an impossible task when the policy environment simultaneously produces the conditions of inequality.

The same document introduces an unknowable requirement, as well, where integration policy is to contribute to immigrants embracing Norwegian values and the “written and unwritten rules” of Norwegian society. Here, immigrants are expected to do more than comply – they must embrace their host country’s ways of being and living. Reference to unwritten rules implies something of importance. First, it requires not mere compliance but interior transformation – immigrants must not simply follow norms but embrace them, suggesting behavioral conformity is insufficient and that cultural assimilation must be genuine. Second, “unwritten rules” are by definition unstated and unverifiable – a permanently available explanation for why an immigrant has not sufficiently integrated, regardless of their actual behavior or commitment (Schinkel, 2017; 2018). This is particularly corrosive to democratic education, which depends on transparency, articulable norms, and the principle that the rules of participation are knowable and equally accessible to all (Biesta, 2007). Westheimer and Kahne (2004) argue that justice-oriented

democratic education requires students to develop the capacity to question and challenge social conditions – a capacity that cannot develop when the norms of participation are deliberately unstated and the conditions of belonging are structurally unknowable.

### **Phase III: Intensification and Precarity**

The third phase does not introduce new logic so much as it intensifies and institutionalizes the logics of the first two. What distinguishes this period is the combination of continued rhetorical sophistication – the explicit stigma of “handouts” has largely disappeared – with material intensification. Legal status has become more precarious, reunification requirements more restrictive, and deportation more systematically enforced (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2024). The gap between what the discourse says and what policy does has narrowed, not because the discourse has become more honest but because the material conditions have caught up to the logic the discourse always implied. As Hagelund (2020) demonstrates in her comparative analysis of post-2015 policy discourse across Scandinavia, Norway’s discursive and policy response to the refugee crisis generated a distinctive trajectory – one characterized by the progressive tightening of social rights alongside the maintenance of formally inclusive institutional language.

The concept of “parallel societies” (Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010) emerges as the organizing problem representation in this phase, appearing across both immigration and integration documents. The term originated in German political discourse in the 1990’s and has since circulated across European contexts through the backlash against multiculturalism that intensified in the 2000s. It has come to denote immigrant communities believed to exist spatially and culturally outside of mainstream society (Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010). In Norwegian policy documents, this framing constructs immigrant communities as threatening social cohesion – a problem located, again, within immigrant communities rather than the structural conditions that produce residential segregation, labor market exclusion, or precarity of temporary legal status.

The solution implied by “parallel societies” discourse is integration understood as cultural dissolution. The problem is framed such that immigrant communities remain distinct, and the solution is that they become less so. Here, as in Phase II, the “host society” is imagined as pristine and problem-free, and any social problem is relegated to those who have yet to fully enter it. This is what Schinkel (2017; 2018) identifies as the characteristic logic of integration discourse, in which “society” has no problems because all problems are problems of integration – and integration is a matter of the position and dispositions of those marked as not yet fully belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006). This is continuous with embracing the “unwritten rules” logic from Phase II but applied at the community rather than the individual level.

This phase also includes the publication of the action plans against antisemitism (2025-2030) and anti-Muslim racism (2025-2030). These documents are formally part of the educational domain and mandate teachers to actively combat discrimination and group-focused hostility (Allport, 1958). These documents represent governmental commitments with specific requirements for implementation directed at both society on the whole and educational institutions. Their publication in the same policy period as documents that construct Muslim asylum seekers as threats to welfare sustainability and cultural cohesion makes the constitutive contradiction impossible to overlook. The state is producing the discourse that generates group-focused hostility and is also the issuer of the mandate requiring teachers to ameliorate it. It might appear that this is poor communication between ministries, but I argue that this is a characteristic of late liberal governance (Povinelli, 2011). There is an outward commitment to inclusion performed through one set of documents while exclusionary logic is maintained in the other.

The precarity that defines this phase operates at the level of individual legal status as much as at the level of discourse. Enhanced cessation and revocation practices (Schultz, 2025), stricter family reunification requirements (Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2025), and the expanded use of temporary rather than permanent protection status mean that students in Norwegian classrooms exist in conditions of genuine legal uncertainty about their own and their families' futures. Butler and Athanasiou (2013) theorize precarity not as a circumstantial feature of individual lives but as a structural condition actively produced through differential distribution of legal recognition – those whose belonging is conditional are rendered structurally vulnerable in ways that shape every dimension of their social participation. A teacher mandated by the curriculum to help each pupil “preserve and develop” their identity in a diverse environment is simultaneously working with students whose capacity to belong tomorrow is uncertain.

## Discussion and Implications

### Structural Impossibility and Late Liberal Governance

The most immediate interpretation of this discourse analysis would be that Norwegian policy is startlingly inconsistent, professing inclusive democratic values in educational documents while undermining those values through restrictive immigration policy and exclusionary discourse. While intuitive and seemingly obvious, this reading misses something much more structurally significant. These contradictions aren't the product of poor coordination between ministries or a policy oversight. Instead, as the WPR framework has revealed, the policy is written in a way that constructs the problem it outwardly appears to be working to disrupt or ameliorate entirely. As Povinelli (2011) theorizes, this apparent contradiction becomes constitutive upon closer examination.

Norway's generous welfare state and inclusive public schools are not contradicted by its restrictive

immigration policy and exclusionary discourse – they are, in a structural sense, enabled by them in a way that requires that they exist for society to function. It is the system working exactly as intended. The welfare state can remain generous for citizens precisely because its boundaries are defended through the “handouts” discourse that marks non-citizens conditionally and incompletely belonging. The inclusive school can perform diversity as a strength precisely because the immigration system regulates, and discursively constructs, who is permitted to belong. Most migrants are kept at the border, and the “peace nation” identity can be maintained because the violence of exclusion is displaced onto the immigration system.

What is most striking is the subtle way that these structural and ideological powers function in a late liberal society. Through a surface level examination, it would appear that Norway’s immigration policy evolved toward the admission of existing racism and xenophobia within its borders over the decade between the European refugee crisis in 2015 to the current moment. Language was included that directly called out racism as a detriment to society that must be eradicated. It is what was missing here that reveals the late liberalism embedded within these policies.

### **The Constitutive Relationship - Teachers at the Hinge**

If this contradiction is inherent rather than merely incidental, teachers occupy a uniquely positioned role within it. They stand at the precise juncture (the “hinge”) where Norway’s apparent inclusivity intersects with its concealed exclusion, and where the democratic school confronts the immigration system. This is the very place where the gap between the two becomes livable for students who experience both simultaneously.

Teachers are the targets of the structure that generates the contradiction and ultimately bear the responsibility to mend the social fractures created by the state and dismantle the prejudices perpetuated by its discourse. As Zembylas and Bekerman (2019) have demonstrated, the intertwining of moral and peace education presents genuine pedagogical challenges, as the institutional conditions necessary for such work are absent. In the Norwegian context, these conditions are not merely absent but actively undermined by the same government apparatus that issues the educational mandate.

### **The Peace Nation Paradox and Comparative Implications**

Norway’s peace nation identity (Leira, 2013; Pisarska, 2016) sharpens the apparent contradictions most acutely. Peace education’s principles are broadly promoted in Norwegian schools through their close tie to democratic values such as equality, free speech, and human rights. While the Nobel Peace Prize is not issued by the Norwegian government, it is closely associated with Norwegian society and is among one of

Norway's most celebrated connections to a commitment to peace across the globe. Yet the same government that projects this identity produces a domestic discourse that describes asylum seekers as threats to welfare sustainability, positions immigrant communities as "parallel societies" (Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010) resistant to integration, and requires immigrant students to embrace "unwritten rules" of a society that has not fully admitted them. What the application of Povinelli's (2011) late liberal governance framework to this data reveals is neither paradoxical nor reassuring. The peace and prosperity experienced as an "insider" are structurally organized around the restriction and stigmatization of those attempting to come in. The "peace nation" identity held so dear may not merely be inconsistent with restrictive immigration policy, rather I argue it requires it as the rhetorical resource that frames restriction as the responsible stewardship of something hard-won and at risk of slipping away.

The gap between progressive educational mandates and exclusionary immigration discourse is not a Norwegian idiosyncrasy but a structural feature of late liberal governance across comparable democracies (Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010). Zembylas and Keet (2018) argue that critical approaches to human rights, citizenship, and democracy education must confront the structural conditions that determine what is pedagogically possible – not merely the design or scope of individual programs. Vesterdal (2019) demonstrates how Norway's human rights education is shaped by its outward facing national identity commitments in ways that frequently displace critical domestic scrutiny, championing rights abroad while leaving the structural conditions at home unexamined. The present analysis identifies what those unexamined structural conditions consist of and how they are produced. In the Norwegian case, the state is producing the prejudices teachers are mandated to resolve, positions students as conditional members of society in which that education occurs, and locates the resulting pedagogical failure in individual teacher practice, program effectiveness, or immigrant deficiency rather than in the policy conditions the state itself created. Democratic education requires democratic policy contexts, and until Norwegian policy achieves coherence across its education and immigration domains, the disconnect inherent in their language creates the conditions under which teachers may find themselves structurally positioned as unwilling mitigators of this impossible condition.

## Conclusion

In this article I examine how Norwegian government discourse constructs diversity as a policy problem across immigration, integration, and educational domains – and what that construction makes impossible for teachers mandated to promote democratic inclusion. Through systematic WPR analysis of nine government documents spanning 2015 – 2025, three distinct phases of problem construction emerge. The explicit burden framing and crisis discourse of 2015-2018, the deficit logic of 2019-2023 in which discrimination is acknowledged and then discursively neutralized, and the institutionalization of precarity of

2022-2025, marked by simultaneous anti-racism directives and increasingly restrictive immigration enforcement. Across all three phases, the same logic persists: the problem is located within immigrant populations, structural causes are silenced, and teachers are assigned the task of managing the consequences.

The central theoretical contribution of this analysis is the concept of unwilling mitigators - teachers who are not simply constrained actors navigating difficult institutional environments, as street-level bureaucracy theory (Lipsky, 2010) and bounded autonomy (Coburn, 2004) frameworks would suggest, but structurally positioned to fail at tasks the policy system itself makes impossible. This concept extends Povinelli's (2011) late liberal governance framework into educational contexts, showing how the hinge between visible inclusion and hidden exclusion is not an abstract structural feature. It also extends Bacchi's (2009) framework by demonstrating the analytical value of applying the same critical analysis across policy domains, making visible the internal governmental ideology that single-domain analysis cannot reveal.

This is not a study focusing on Norwegian exceptionalism but is rather an exploration of how progressive educational mandates operate alongside exclusionary immigration discourse. It is made especially sharp in the Norwegian case precisely because its national identity is so explicitly organized around peace, humanitarian commitment, and democratic education. As I have argued, however, it then produces some of the most explicit racialized welfare stigma and conditional belonging language in its official policy record.

Future research should examine teacher experiences navigating these contradictions in practice – including moments of refusal, collective resistance, and the effects of structural impossibility on teacher wellbeing and professional identity. Student perspectives on the gap between educational inclusion and family exclusion represent a critically underexplored dimension. Comparative research examining how other Nordic countries with similar welfare state structures manage equivalent tensions would illuminate whether the Norwegian case represents a unique configuration or a regional pattern.

The question this analysis ultimately poses is not a matter related to the effectiveness of pedagogy. It's not "How can we better train teachers to navigate diversity?" Better training cannot resolve structural contradictions that function to keep the status quo intact. The question is instead political. How can democratic societies create policy coherence that enables rather than undermines democratic education? Until that question is taken up at the level of government rather than displaced onto the professional development of individual teachers, Norway's educators will remain what this analysis has shown them to be – unwilling mitigators of state-produced contradictions assigned the responsibility of healing the social fractures created by the state institutions that employ them.

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