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Forum

From Deficit to Design: Rethinking Participation for Migrant and Newly Arrived Learners in Nordic Education

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Introduction

This special issue brings together six studies from across the Nordic region. They cover vocational language learning in Norway (Killmer & Stiklestad, 2026), teacher engagement with Ukrainian students in Denmark and Finland (Krogager Andersen et al., 2026), literacy participation in Danish reception classes (Hummelmose, 2026), teacher language ideology in Finnish and Norwegian vocational education (Ribu et al., 2026), arts-based second language pedagogy in Sweden and Iceland (Jepson Wigg et al., 2026) and teacher attitudes toward newly arrived students in Iceland and Norway (Hoffmann et al., 2026). Read separately, each contributes a careful, locally grounded account of migrant or newcomer education in its own sector and setting. Read together, they reveal something more than the sum of their parts, with a common thread running through all six. We see institutions and educators who genuinely intend to include newcomers, yet who often work within conditions that limit what they can achieve. Conner and Norman (2022) show that even strongly held intentions need the right conditions to become action, and they call this pattern the 'intention-effect gap'. This forum piece asks why the gap opens and where it can be narrowed.

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We organise the discussion thematically rather than study by study because the value of a special issue lies in the connections it makes visible. The first theme traces a shift in how the field frames the learner and the family, from individual deficit toward distributed responsibility. The second examines language ideology and multilingualism as a resource, showing how monolingual assumptions persist despite decades of contrary evidence. The third turns from belief to structure, showing that institutional and temporal factors can enable or limit participation independently of what any individual educator believes. The fourth asks which pedagogical responses are effective and finds that even these carry challenges worth noting. The fifth considers belonging itself, arguing that it functions as a precondition for participation rather than a byproduct of it.

Theme one: from individual deficit to distributed responsibility

A recurring finding across the studies is that migrant and newly arrived students, and their families, are still understood through a deficit lens even where policy language insists otherwise. Cummins (2000) distinguishes between coercive relations of power (which focus on what learners and families lack) and collaborative relations of power (which recognise their linguistic and cultural resources as assets).

Nilsson and Bunar's (2016) work on deficit approaches makes the same point, arguing that a disproportionate institutional focus on what students lack obscures the capacities they already possess. Gay (2018) and Nieto (2017) explain that this persists because teacher beliefs mediate policy and practice, shaping expectations about achievement and belonging before any learning begins.

Hoffmann et al. (2026), studying lower-secondary teachers in Iceland and Norway, show coercive relations of power operating directly. Their interviews reveal many teachers describing newly arrived students as passive learners and generalising about the effect of culture or school background, even though the students come from different school systems and have diverse histories. Yet the same study also captures a collaborative moment, when one teacher describes a multilingual student independently using Arabic and translation technologies to build an understanding of science content, and expresses surprise at the vocabulary and understanding this reveals. The gap between the teacher's assumption and the student's practice is the coercive and collaborative dynamic in miniature.

Families are often positioned through the same deficit lens. Hoffmann et al. (2026) report four Icelandic teachers who agreed that cooperation with parents from refugee and immigrant backgrounds was limited and parental involvement low. One teacher describes trying to give families online tools to use at home but concludes that parents do not seem to use them. The authors note that teachers position parents, like students, as not responding to the school's efforts, and expected little cooperation from the parents of

newly arrived students. The intention is clear - the teacher is trying to help, but the effect is that a lack of response is interpreted as a lack of interest. In Cummins' (2000) terms, this is a coercive relation of power at the level of the family where parents are judged against the school's expectations.

However, this overlooks what families already contribute. Moll et al. (1992) use the term funds of knowledge for the skills and knowledge that families hold whatever their language or migration history, and that schools routinely miss because they are not looking for them. A teacher who sends resources home and sees them unused may be looking at a family that supports learning in ways the school has no experience of. Bourdieu's (1986) work on cultural capital suggests why. Schools tend to recognise the knowledge and habits of the dominant culture, so support that looks different can be interpreted as limited parental involvement. Antony-Newman (2020) found this among Eastern European immigrant parents in Canada, whose involvement was recognised only when it resembled middle-class practice, and the Icelandic teachers' sense that parents not responding may rest on a similar narrow view about parental involvement.

Killmer and Stiklestad's (2026) study of adult students in Norwegian child and youth care and health care programmes offers a useful counterpoint. Care work is carried out through language and interaction so the language demands are high; the authors treat language learning as co-constructed between student, mentor and colleagues and not as a fixed skill a student either has or lacks. When a student struggles to follow instructions on a busy ward, the analysis asks what the mentor did or did not do to make the interaction workable, therefore, supportive mentors matter. Across the set, the vocabulary of deficit has receded from policy documents, but the underlying habit of mind, locating the problem in the learner or the family rather than the system, persists in everyday talk.

Theme two: language ideology and multilingualism as resource

If deficit framing is the pattern, language ideology is one of its clearest mechanisms. Grosjean (1989) argued that a bilingual person is not two monolinguals in one, so measuring a multilingual learner against a monolingual standard misrepresents what that learner knows. Cummins (1979) built on this through the linguistic interdependence hypothesis, which holds that skills developed in one language support the other, so a strong first language is an asset. García (2009) and García and Wei (2014) extended this through translanguaging, showing that multilingual learners draw on a single, integrated linguistic repertoire. Cognitive research points the same way, finding that bilingualism supports academic achievement (Baker, 2007; Bialystok, 2001; 2011).

Nevertheless, Ribu et al. (2026), drawing on responses from 614 vocational teachers across Finland and

Norway, show how far classroom practice still sits from this evidence base. Many teachers are still developing the strategies for linguistically responsive teaching, and some feel uncomfortable when they do not understand the languages around them or worry that students are going off task. The authors identify three discourses. One holds that some languages are valued more highly than others, and another that a shared language of instruction drives inclusion and protection. The third supports students' L1 languages for learning and for human rights. One teacher writes that "All languages should be allowed to be used to aid learning" (p. 13) while another says, "I don't think other languages pose a threat to it" (p. 13). Majority language use was often justified by everybody's right to understand, especially the teachers', and the authors link this to lower trust in multilingual students. This tension would ease if contemporary research findings were to influence everyday practice.

The same ideology reaches adult learners at work. Killmer and Stiklestad (2026) describe students who found their wider linguistic repertoire a professional asset, for example when calming a distressed child or clarifying what an elderly patient needs. This echoes Meier and Styger's (2026, as cited in Killmer & Stiklestad, 2026) finding that multilingual skills can build rapport. Yet the students also described workplace rules, including a sense that speaking another language in front of colleagues who do not understand it "does not look good" (p. 20). Many responded by speaking only Norwegian at work to maintain professional standing so an asset that should support care is set aside to protect status. Antony-Newman (2024) documents the household version of this pattern, showing that the plurilingual practices immigrant parents use to support their children's learning are a skilled resource that schools tend not to recognise. Across the papers, multilingualism emerges as a source of educational possibility and the challenge lies in systems that continue to favour monolingual norms.

Theme three: institutional and temporal factors

The third theme shifts from beliefs to structural factors. Hummelmose (2026) frames participation as depending on institutional, instructional and temporal conditions. The study of Danish reception education compares a traditional reception class with direct enrolment and supplementary language support, and with a reception class set up under temporary protective legislation for displaced Ukrainian students. It shows that a student's access to academic content depends on how a lesson is designed and delivered, and on how much continuity the surrounding arrangement allows. For example, a crafts and design lesson built around visual instruction and material artefacts opens participation for a student with limited language proficiency in a way that a verbally led lesson does not, regardless of the individual teacher's skill.

Killmer and Stiklestad (2026) offer a parallel argument. Authentic workplaces are valuable for learning professional terminology, yet students described access as uneven, and fast-paced acute-care settings

leave little room for the extended clarification that language learning benefits from, however attentive a mentor tries to be. Hoffmann et al. (2026) support the same claim from the staffing side. Teachers' sense of preparedness was equally low whether newly arrived students were in mainstream classes, as in Iceland, or in a reception class, as in Norway. At one Icelandic school, however, teachers felt better prepared. That school had more experience of teaching migrant students, and its management gave active support and hired a teaching assistant who shared the students' language. The authors read this as evidence that support structures strengthen teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2015). This complicates any assumption that positive attitudes towards multilingualism would resolve the problems traced in themes one and two, because a well-intentioned educator in a time-pressed or understaffed setting will still struggle to create participation.

Theme four: pedagogical response - what encourages participation?

The fourth theme asks which pedagogical approaches facilitate participation. Freire's (1970) distinction between banking education, in which knowledge is deposited into a passive recipient, and problem-posing education, in which learners and educators construct understanding together, is a useful frame here. Jepson Wigg et al. (2026) compare music-integrated language teaching in Sweden with a drama club in Iceland, drawing on the multiliteracies framework (New London Group, 1996), in which meaning is made through gesture and image as well as words. Rhythm and melody let adult learners join in and produce whole phrases before mastering complex vocabulary, while drama games offered low-stakes ways into participation. In both settings, adult migrants moved from passive students to active co-creators. One participant describes the effect directly when she says, "I did not realise that I could become an actress. They [the instructors] opened me. I am sparkling now" (p. 12), and another says drama let her "show my inner world, my emotions" (p. 12). These remarks describe the shift from object of instruction to subject of one's own learning that Freire's framework advocates.

This resonates with two other studies. Hummelmose's (2026) strongest example of participation is itself multimodal, since visual and material resources carried meaning that language alone could not yet carry. Killmer and Stiklestad's (2026) participants described drawing on their full linguistic repertoires as an essential tool for understanding vocational content, which maps onto García and Wei's (2014) account of translanguaging in practice.

Nevertheless, Jepson Wigg et al. (2026) also note that some adult students in the Swedish case can feel infantilised by arts-based methods, as adults asked to sing or act risk being treated, even unintentionally, as children. The Icelandic club, by contrast, appears to have created a space where adult learners could draw

on their bodily, emotional and aesthetic resources without the activities being seen as childish. The conditions differed too, since the Swedish work sat within school-based professional development while the Icelandic club grew from grassroots leadership. The finding is that how an intervention is experienced matters as much as its design.

Theme five: belonging as a precondition for agency

Throughout the papers, belonging emerges as a precondition for learning and not as an outcome of it. Learners participate more fully when they feel recognised and less so when they are positioned through deficit frameworks. Norton's (2013) concept of investment captures the individual dimension well as learners invest effort in language learning to the degree that they perceive real opportunities for recognition and future possibility. Freire's (1970) broader argument extends this from the individual to the collective, treating education as empowerment in which students can shape teaching and learning and not simply fit in with a curriculum decided elsewhere.

Family engagement research offers a complementary account of what this looks like at institutional level. Epstein's (2001) framework for school, family and community partnership argues that meaningful engagement depends on genuine channels for two-way communication and shared decision-making, and not simply on requests for parental compliance. Where these are absent, Gorski (2016) warns, institutions tend to explain gaps in engagement through culture, treating a family's apparent distance as a cultural trait and overlooking the school's part in building the relationship. The Icelandic teachers in Hoffmann et al. (2026) show this in practice where resources sent home are a one-way offer, and non-use is (mis)interpreted as low engagement and not as a prompt to find out what families already do at home. A two-way channel would begin from the question these teachers do not ask. Additionally, trust is also fragile from the other side. Killmer and Stiklestad (2026) report that child and youth care students found conversations with parents more intimidating than work with children, and one says, "I was afraid of them" (p. 18), fearing that language mistakes would undermine parental trust.

Belonging can be built or lost in everyday interaction. Killmer and Stiklestad (2026) describe students made to feel "invisible" in staff break rooms (p. 21) and colleagues who pretended not to understand them. The authors argue that this informal ostracism is as serious a barrier as exclusion during work tasks, because students withdrew from interaction and lost chances to learn. The drama club shows the opposite process. Jepson Wigg et al. (2026) describe participation growing through a gradual building of group trust and the overcoming of initial shyness through social games in a non-formal community space. One participant linked the sense of being opened up directly to language learning, explaining that the language barrier was removed because she had already started saying something in Icelandic. Trust and belonging came first and

engagement with the target language followed. Across these studies, belonging comes before sustained engagement and makes it possible.

Conclusion: implications for practice and policy

Read as a set, these six studies suggest that better attitudes and more inclusive language, though welcome, will not be enough on their own. They point toward a structural agenda grounded in existing scholarship on bilingualism, power, and family and community knowledge. Teacher education needs to move beyond raising awareness of deficit thinking and toward equipping teachers and mentors with practical tools to redesign interactions in real time, informed by research on multilingual repertoires and by Freire's problem-posing model. School and workplace management need to treat staffing and time as participation infrastructure in their own right. Family engagement, in particular, needs to move from Epstein's compliance-oriented model toward genuine partnership built on the funds of knowledge and community cultural wealth that Moll et al. (1992) describe, so that distance is not explained through culture before first asking what the school has done to build the relationship.

The comparative Nordic design shared across all six studies is itself instructive. Norway, Finland, Denmark, Sweden and Iceland share a broadly similar policy rhetoric of equity and inclusion, yet this issue shows it playing out differently by sector and institutional model. What matters, across all of them, is whether an arrangement is given the time and staffing that participation requires, and whether learners and families feel recognised and not merely accommodated. Interestingly, none of the six studies includes the perspectives of parents or families directly. Where families appear, it is through teachers' accounts of them, which is itself an instance of the pattern described here. Nor does any study follow students or families over time, so it remains unclear whether participation increases once a student moves into mainstream provision, or whether family partnership built during a reception phase outlasts that transition. Future work might usefully include parents as participants in their own right and track transitions. If there is a single message to take from this collection, it is that narrowing the intention-effect gap depends on how teaching and learning are designed as much as on the skills and dispositions of the practitioners themselves.

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