

To appear and be recognised

Migrants' narrated transitions in Swedish and Norwegian vocational education

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Abstract

This article analyses the content of adult migrants' narratives in Sweden and Norway about transitions within vocational education and training (VET), including barriers and openings in their trajectories, practices of resistance, quests for recognition, and manifestations of agency. Anchored in a political-philosophical understanding of action, plurality and the public realm, and informed by a narrative positioning approach, we read VET as relational settings where subjects become visible through action and speech vis-à-vis peers, professionals, and institutions. The study is based on interviews conducted in both countries. Six narratives (three Swedish, three Norwegian) were selected for in-depth analysis to highlight variation across gender-coded VET arenas and institutional conditions. Analytically, we combined a shared codebook with close reading of intradiegetic, interactional, and discursive positionings. Cross-country comparisons were conducted only on anonymised excerpts. Across cases, resistance is narrated through strategic reorientation, relational work, communicative agency, self-initiated competence-building and quiet perseverance. Three analytical themes structure the findings: 1) appearance through action and speech, 2) plurality as a resource for recognition, and 3) education as an arena for negotiating the 'right to have rights'. The analysis shows how possibilities for recognition are conditioned by membership regimes, language requirements and organisational procedures, while placements, validation and guidance can open relational pathways to visibility. We conclude that VET can function as a space for political emergence, but also reproduce exclusion, depending on how institutions recognise plurality and make room for subjects to appear as holders of rights.

Keywords: Migrants, transitions, recognition, agency, vocational education



Introduction

Despite extensive integration policy efforts in both Sweden and Norway, persistent differences remain between native-born and foreign-born individuals in employment, income, and occupational status. Refugees and migrants from countries outside the EU/EEA face structural barriers that hinder establishment, recognition, and labour market participation (Bevelander & Irastorza, 2021; Brell et al., 2020; OECD, 2022). Although Sweden has at times experienced strong labour demand and relatively high employment growth among foreign-born individuals, the gap compared to native-born persists (SCB, 2022). Research links this persistence to how migrants' competence is positioned within labour-market transitions (Brell et al., 2020; OECD, 2022). In the Norwegian context, similar patterns have been documented. Despite relatively high labour-market participation among immigrants over time, significant gaps persist between immigrants and the native-born population. Research highlights that recognition of competence and transitions into regulated professions shape migrants' opportunities for labour-market entry (Nortvedt et al., 2024; Stalder et al., 2024). As in Sweden, migrants outside the EU/EEA face challenges related to language requirements, credentialing procedures, and limited access to bridging programmes, which can prolong or complicate labour-market integration (Andersson & Osman, 2008; Osman, 2024). These dynamics underscore the need to examine what migrants' narratives reveal about their transitions within differently structured Vocational Education and Training (VET) systems.

Recent demographic developments in both countries help contextualise who is included in the adult education target groups. The proportion of individuals with immigrant backgrounds has increased in both contexts, although at different rates. In Norway, immigrants and Norwegian-born persons with immigrant parents constituted around 21 percent of the population in 2025, and the number of individuals with immigrant backgrounds rose by approximately 22 percent over the previous five years (Integrerings- og mangfoldsdirektoratet [Directorate of Integration and Diversity], 2025; Statistisk sentralbyrå [Statistics Norway], 2025a). In Sweden, the share increased from 19 percent in 2014 to 24.6 percent in 2025 (SCB, 2024). Although Sweden has a higher overall share of people with immigrant backgrounds, Norway has experienced faster growth in the population with immigrant backgrounds in recent years. This increase is linked to recent inflows, including EEA labour migration and arrivals from Ukraine. In both Sweden and Norway, today's migrant populations also include earlier labour migration flows from the 1960s and 1970s, which form an important historical backdrop to current migration patterns. Norway's faster growth reflects these more recent movements, while Sweden's higher baseline stems partly from earlier refugee waves and partly from long standing labour migration routes established in the mid 20th century. Neither situation implies easier labour market entry, as migrants from outside the EU/EEA continue to face substantial barriers in both countries. Employment statistics likewise point to enduring gaps: in 2024, 68 percent of immigrants in Norway were employed versus 80 percent among the rest of the population (Statistisk sentralbyrå, 2025b). In Sweden, 73.1 percent of immigrants were employed compared to 83.2 percent among the rest of the population (SCB, 2024). These patterns motivate an analysis that attends both to institutional conditions and to what migrants' narratives reveal about their transitions within these conditions.

VET is emphasised in European and Nordic policy as a key arena for labour market integration through language development, validation, work placements, and guidance (Persson Thunqvist

et al., 2019; Teräs, 2024). VET is often presented as a technical solution to integration challenges, assuming migrants will simply comply with institutional measures, but research shows they actively engage with these measures – negotiating, resisting, and reorienting themselves within complex structures (Stiklestad & Monrad-Krohn, 2025; Teräs et al., 2024). Resistance is articulated through narratives, choices, and practices that challenge prevailing structures and open spaces for agency. Rugkåsa (2010), in her ethnographic study of qualification measures for minority women in Norway, shows how institutional practices shape participants through norms and categorisation. Women from non-Western countries are often positioned as cultural others, where well-intentioned interventions simultaneously reproduce asymmetrical power relations. This occurs within what Rugkåsa terms a “regime of goodness” (p. 228), where adaptation to majority ideals becomes a condition for recognition. In the Swedish context, similar mechanisms have been identified. Asghari (2025) shows how newly arrived women navigate vocational education within Yrkesvux (municipal adult vocational education), where prior skills are often undervalued or only partly recognised. Their stories indicate how institutional expectations, labour-market demand, and gendered pathways shape participation. Although VET is formally open and flexible, migrants frequently encounter barriers related to language, credential recognition, and the sorting of professions as more suitable for particular groups.

To situate current arrangements, Norway’s 2000 competence reform established an adult right to upper secondary education and broadened provision (NOU 2001:25). Subsequent demographic change has supported more systematic qualification routes, and the Integreringsloven [Integration Act] (2020) secures access to language learning, civic knowledge, formal qualifications, and completion of the introduction programme (see also Meld. St. 21, 2020–2021; Statistisk sentralbyrå, 2025c). Participation in Norway’s introduction programme reached 34,500 in 2024, indicating intensified policy effort in a shifting demographic context (Integrerings- og mangfoldsdirektoratet, 2025). While long-settled immigrants are not entitled to education under the Integreringsloven (2020), the Opplæringslova [Education Act] (2023) grants adults the right to upper secondary education leading to general or vocational qualifications, including vocational requalification. In Sweden, the Skollag [Education Act] (2010:800) grants adults access to upper secondary education, including vocational pathways such as Yrkesvux. Policy links language, vocational training, workplace learning and validation, yet recognition of prior learning is uneven and routes into regulated professions vary across municipalities (Andersson & Fejes, 2010; Andersson & Osman, 2008). Since the 1990s, both Sweden and Norway have developed distinct arrangements that condition opportunities to act across language training, validation, work placements, and guidance, with local variation shaping how strategies and resistance are narrated (Osman, 2024). Nordic research likewise shows agency at the intersection of prior competence, supportive persons and networks, and enabling frameworks. In Sweden, return-to-profession trajectories have been facilitated by language proficiency, individual motivation, supportive encounters with mentors and employers, and programme architectures that connect validation, practice, and supplementary education (Eliasson et al., 2022). Related work identifies important encounters that operate as turning points by positioning migrants as competent actors within concrete institutional settings (Eliasson, 2024).

Against this background, we draw on Hannah Arendt's political philosophy to conceptualise education as a space for action, plurality, and emergence. Her notion of "appearing" in the public realm (1958, p. 50) enables us to analyse what emerges in the narratives concerning resistance, quests for recognition and manifestations of agency through storytelling and practice. Analytically, three themes emerge from the narratives and guide our reading: 1) what becomes visible as subjects appear through action and speech, 2) what enables plurality to function as a resource for recognition, and 3) what delineates education as an arena where the 'right to have rights' is negotiated. To capture how acting subjects are constructed in relation to institutional structures, we combine this lens with narrative positioning analysis (Bamberg, 1997, 2004). Building on this framework, the aim of the article is to contribute to knowledge about what emerges in adult migrants' narratives in Sweden and Norway concerning their educational transitions within vocational education. We focus particularly on the barriers and openings described in their educational transitions, on the forms of resistance they articulate, on the kinds of recognition they seek, and on the manifestations of agency that appear in encounters with institutional arrangements such as placements, validation, guidance and membership regimes. In line with Arendt's (1958) notion of appearance through action and speech, we attend to relational settings where subjects become visible in interaction with others and institutions. Guided by this aim, we ask:

What do adult migrants' narratives in Sweden and Norway reveal about the barriers, openings, forms of resistance, quests for recognition, and expressions of agency that shape their educational transitions within vocational education?

Educational transitions, agency and resistance

Research on migrants' educational transitions has long highlighted structural conditions such as the recognition of prior learning, language requirements, and access to education in host countries. In Sweden, register-based studies have shown that educational levels are often missing or only recorded long after arrival, which may influence recognition of qualifications and labour market opportunities (Careja & Bevelander, 2018; Khaef, 2022; Saarela & Weber, 2017). Educational data is frequently collected through self-reporting, which introduces uncertainty in data quality and contributes to positioning migrants as objects of policy rather than as acting subjects (Khaef, 2022). At the same time, research shows that migrants respond to educational measures with agency. They negotiate and articulate resistance (Levitt & Schiller, 2004).

Migrants' educational transitions are also explored in a study by Crone (2021), who shows that such transitions can involve shifts in self-understanding, as narratives of prior experience are reconfigured in encounters with new educational environments. This aligns with a narrative approach to identity, where storytelling operates as positioning and agency. Resistance is also narrated around assessment and recognition. Studies show that education and work experience from outside the EU are often positioned as lower-status, producing hierarchies of cultural capital and channeling (re)entry through subordinate routes (Andersson & Osman, 2008; Osman, 2024). We read the narrated positioning as resistance to such structural ordering, expressed through efforts to navigate and challenge restrictive norms and assessment practices. At the same time, orientation is often narrated through relational openings that make concrete

relations, placements, or pathways visible. Contingent encounters (informal, unexpected meetings) and individual support can reframe possibilities by making new opportunities and directions visible (Andersson & Osman, 2008; Osman, 2024). This points to agency as co-constructed in interaction rather than guaranteed by formal inclusion, a distinction that also appears in research on the roles of immigrant organisations in establishment processes (Sandberg et al., 2023). By relational processes we mean positionings that are co-constructed with teachers, peers and workplace actors, whereas formal inclusion refers to programmatic rights or entitlements. Despite their relational resources and interactive potential, immigrant organisations are frequently marginalised in integration policy, which limits their capacity to act as intermediaries.

Narrative research has further shown how migrants, through storytelling, articulate agency and position themselves within society. Triandafyllidou and Kumar (2024) demonstrate that educational transitions are constructed in relation to complex structural conditions, where power relations and policies interact in shaping migrants' life trajectories. Teräs (2024) critically examines the concept of integration, which is often used normatively and without clear definition, risking the objectification of migrants as the others. She calls for more nuanced analytical frameworks that can capture the complexity of integration, particularly in relation to education. In this perspective, migration and education are narrated as existential and intergenerational transitions in which sacrifice and ethical considerations are central (Chrisphonte, 2025). Within a social constructionist approach, resistance is an ethical-political form of narrative position-taking through which migrants renegotiate their place, and such renegotiation is itself a form of agency. In a similar vein, Asghari (2025) and Stiklestad and Monrad-Krohn (2025) show how migrants in Swedish and Norwegian vocational education position themselves as competent actors through storytelling and experiential learning. They also describe forms of strategic engagement (deliberate positioning moves such as selecting programmes aligned with experiential resources or cultivating relational openings in placements), making recognition narratively attainable within existing institutional arrangements.

In summary, previous research shows that migrants' educational transitions are socially and institutionally situated processes in which agency and resistance play a central role. In light of Arendt's political philosophy, these narratives take on particular relevance: they show how migrants appear as acting subjects in the public realm, where their plurality, experiences, and voices can be recognised. Arendt's concepts of agency, appearance, and the 'right to have rights' offer a theoretical framework for understanding education not merely as a technical process, but as a space for political existence and recognition.

Resistance and educational transitions

In this article, we use Hannah Arendt's political philosophy to understand what migrants' narratives reveal about educational transitions in Sweden and Norway. Her reflections on agency, plurality and the public realm offer conceptual tools for examining education as a space for resistance, recognition and political existence. Through speech, action and storytelling, individuals appear before others as political subjects (Arendt, 1958, 1972). This appearance is not given; it often takes shape in response to marginalisation, invisibility, and structural

constraints. Arendt (1958) emphasises human plurality (the fact that individuals differ) as the condition for political action. Plurality is not only a social characteristic but an ontological basis for shared reality and intersubjectivity (Loidolt, 2017). Within such diversity, action becomes possible without sovereignty over outcomes (Arendt, 1958). Resistance in this framework is not necessarily confrontational but consists of appearing, becoming visible and renegotiating one's place in the world. Loidolt (2017) also highlights the ethical dimension of plurality, where reality is constituted through encounters between different perspectives. Speaking and acting are therefore expressions of subjectivity as well as responsibility in a shared world.

This relational view of appearance also informs Arendt's later work on the public realm. For Arendt (1963, 1968), the public realm is the space where individuals become visible to one another as acting subjects, and where institutional structures may enable or delimit such appearance. Even under difficult historical conditions, such as statelessness or displacement, people can create meaning and appear as subjects through action and storytelling (Arendt, 1951, 1963). Her analysis of statelessness shows that the 'right to have rights' depends on belonging to a political community (Arendt, 1951); without such membership, individuals risk being reduced to objects of intervention rather than recognised as subjects with experiences and voices.

Arendt's distinction between labour, work and action (1958) further illuminates the threefold character of education: as necessity (labour), as the creation of a durable world (work), and as a space for political action (action). It is in this third dimension, where people speak, act, and are recognised, that educational transitions can be understood as political processes. Resistance here becomes a way of creating space for agency, articulating experience, and renegotiating identity. Arendt (2003) stresses that political action involves judgement and responsibility, including the courage to challenge established norms.

Arendt's philosophy thus offers an analytical framework for understanding migrants' educational transitions as more than movements between institutions, as acts through which individuals appear, resist, and seek recognition in a shared world. In relation to the aim and research questions of this article, this means examining how migrants, through storytelling and practice, create possibilities to be seen, heard, and recognised as acting subjects in and through vocational education.

Methodological approach

This study is based on a narrative research approach, focusing on how migrants construct meaning about themselves and their world through storytelling (cf. Mishler, 1999). In the interview context, participants highlight what they perceive as relevant to the interviewer, or what they believe the interviewer wants to hear. By narrating their experiences of vocational education and working life, they construct various identities – what Mishler (1999, p. 19) refers to as "identity performance". These can be understood as attempts to show who they are and how they wish to be perceived. At the same time, storytelling involves reflection on lived experience (cf. Bruner, 1986; Freeman, 2010), where past events are reconfigured in interaction with the interviewer. Language gives meaning to what has been, but the narrative is also situated, shaped in relation to the researcher as conversational partner and to the questions posed. What is told, and how and why, is influenced by life experiences and by the communicative context of the interview.

During 2024 and 2025, Hamid Asghari conducted twelve individual narrative interviews (cf. Mishler, 1999) with adult students with migrant backgrounds in Sweden. In Norway, the data consist of focus-group interviews with seventeen participants, conducted by Sigrun Saur Stiklestad in 2023. The use of different interview formats reflects the institutional and pedagogical contexts of the two settings: in Sweden, individual interviews offered space for extended personal storytelling (cf. Mishler, 1999), while in Norway, focus groups created a dialogic environment that enabled interaction and shared meaning-making among participants (cf. Tjora, 2021). All interviews were conducted in settings designed to support a safe and conversational atmosphere.

In total, 29 narratives were collected across the two countries. In this article, we analyse six of them (three from each country) to illuminate variations in how educational transitions are narrated within two distinct VET contexts. The selection is strategic (purposive) and aims to ensure variation in programme type, gendered VET fields, length of stay, and learning contexts. The gender composition of the selected narratives reflects the structural segregation that characterises VET and the labour market in both countries: in Sweden, participants were recruited from technical programmes that are predominantly male-dominated, while in Norway, participants were recruited from child and youth care and health programmes that are strongly female-dominated (cf. Amble et al., 2023; Reisel et al., 2019). This limits direct comparability across the two cases but provides analytically useful contrasts regarding how recognition, resistance, and appearance are narrated in differently gender-coded VET arenas (cf. Asghari, 2025; Stiklestad & Monrad-Krohn, 2025).

Several narratives not included in the analysis addressed entrepreneurial ambitions or repeated themes already represented in the selected cases. To avoid thematic overlap and remain within the word limit, we therefore included only those narratives that contributed distinct analytical perspectives. The selection is thus not statistically representative, but theoretically and analytically motivated (cf. Mishler, 1995). To clarify the origin of each narrative, we use fictional names beginning with S for Sweden and N for Norway. The Swedish narratives concern three men, Sami, Sile, and Soren, while the Norwegian narratives concern three women, Nasna, Noella, and Nataha. The names were chosen to be neutral and not to signal ethnicity or religion.

Analytical method: Positioning analysis

Given the aim of this study, we adopt a narrative approach with positioning analysis (Bamberg, 1997, 2004) to determine what the narratives reveal about migrants' educational transitions in VET, namely barriers and openings in their educational transitions, quests for recognition, and expressions of agency and resistance in relation to institutional arrangements. Within a social constructionist framework, positioning analysis is used here to establish what identities, roles and relations become visible across the narratives (Bamberg, 2006), and what links can be identified between these positions and broader discourses and organisational procedures (Bamberg, 1997). In this sense, we treat resistance as a recognisable outcome of positioning, that is, what the narratives reveal about how marginalising structures are challenged, how place is renegotiated, and how agency becomes visible under the conditions of vocational education.

Analytically, we proceeded by first developing and agreeing upon a shared codebook (covering definitions, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and examples) which we used to calibrate coding across the two datasets and specify recurrent categories (e.g., membership regimes, language requirements, recognition procedures). We then carried out close readings of the narratives to identify what turning points and openings are narrated in the transitions, followed by an examination of what relations can be established between intradiegetic, interactional, and discursive positionings. Each narrative was analysed in accordance with Bamberg's three positioning levels (Bamberg, 1997, 2004): 1) positioning within the story world (sometimes referred to as the intradiegetic level) – how actors (e.g., the narrator, teachers, authorities) are positioned in relation to one another; 2) positioning in the storytelling interaction – how narrators position themselves in relation to the imagined reader or interviewer; and 3) positioning in relation to broader discursive frameworks – how the narrative relates to dominant norms concerning integration, education, and citizenship. All cross-country comparisons were conducted on anonymised excerpts prepared for this article, using a shared codebook to ensure analytic consistency.

Through this analysis, we were able to highlight how educational transitions are constructed as arenas for recognition, agency, and resistance, and how these possibilities are shaped in relation to legal and institutional conditions. Positioning analysis thus enabled an interpretation of the narratives in light of Arendt's (1951, 1958) concepts of plurality, appearance, the 'right to have rights', and resistance as political action.

Ethical considerations

The study adhered to established ethical standards in Sweden and Norway. The Swedish component was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Dnr 2024-00400-01) and conducted in accordance with the Swedish Research Council's guidelines (2024). The Norwegian component was approved by Sikt (2022) and followed its ethical framework. Both emphasise the researcher's responsibility to safeguard participants' integrity, ensure informed consent, and manage data with respect for human dignity. Participants received oral and written information about the study's purpose, voluntary participation, the right to withdraw, and the intended use of data in research and teaching. Written consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymity was ensured through pseudonyms and removal of identifying details from transcripts and quotations. Sensitive personal data, such as ethnic origin, political views, religion, union membership, health status, or sexual life, were neither collected nor analysed, in line with definitions provided by the Integritetsskyddsmyndigheten [Swedish Authority for Privacy Protection] (2021) and Sikt (2022).

Data collection and handling followed country-specific procedures. Transcription and anonymisation were carried out separately. Only anonymised excerpts relevant to this article were exchanged for cross-case analysis. The analysis draws exclusively on anonymised material prepared for this study, and only segments pertinent to the aim were included. Narrative selection (three Swedish and three Norwegian cases) was undertaken independently by each researcher.

Results

In this section, the migrants' narratives are analysed using narrative positioning analysis (Bamberg, 1997, 2004), with a focus on how they construct themselves as acting subjects in relation to other actors, institutional structures, and societal discourses. The analysis draws on Bamberg's three levels of positioning: the intradiegetic (within the story), the interactional (in the storytelling situation), and the discursive (in relation to broader norms and institutions). The narratives are thematised in terms of how resistance, recognition, and agency are articulated in educational transitions, where vocational education emerges as an arena for both subjective appearance and structural negotiation. In line with Arendt's political philosophy, these narratives are understood as expressions of plurality and political action, where individuals appear, become visible, and seek recognition in the public realm. Resistance takes multiple forms across the narratives: strategic reorientation (Sile), relational emergence (Nasna), communicative agency (Noella), self-initiated competence-building (Soren), cultural presence and quiet perseverance (Nataha), and strategic visibility through education (Sami). These variations illustrate how migrants navigate conditional possibilities to be recognised as subjects with the 'right to have rights' (Arendt, 1951), not through linear progression, but through situated practices shaped by experience, interaction, and institutional context.

Sami's narrative

Sami, who was 21 years old in 2025 when interviewed, shares:

I started working at the age of seven in a slaughterhouse in my home country. First as a runner, but I soon learned how to slaughter and butcher meat. I never received a salary, only leftovers and bones to take home to my family. My father was ill, my mother cared for us children, and work became a way to help out. The employer wanted to support us, but without money. [...] Then it became dangerous. My brothers and I lived under the threat of being recruited into war. They fled first. I had no money, but my employer lent me enough to pay a smuggler. I arrived in Sweden at the age of 17. [...] I've always lived under difficult economic conditions, and that has shaped my view of work: you have to take whatever job is available to survive. At the same time, it's hard for migrants to get jobs. You have to be extra competent. I chose the Agricultural Programme to become a farmer, partly because I have experience with animals, and partly because there are jobs in the sector. Through the education, I got a job on a farm, and thanks to that, I now have good chances of obtaining permanent residency.

Sami's narrative articulates agency shaped at the intersection of vulnerability and strategic action. Narratively (intradiegetic), he positions himself as responsible and competent, where work appears as both necessity and opportunity. By choosing the Agricultural Programme based on prior experience and labour market needs, education emerges as a means to build a future and gain recognition. In the interview context (interactional), he addresses the interviewer through generalised formulations ("you have to take whatever job is available"), a narrative performance (Mishler, 1999) that legitimises his choices and co-constructs a shared interpretive frame. In relation to broader discourses (discursive), the account challenges assumptions of migrant passivity since Sami appears as an acting subject who navigates institutional conditions with strategic resilience. Resistance is enacted as emergence: through education-as-visibility he renegotiates position and moves toward recognition for residency (cf. Arendt, 1958).

Sile's narrative

Sile, who was 25 years old in 2024 when interviewed, shares:

I lost my father early, and my brother and I took over his job as welders. We worked long days, often without pay, just food as compensation. We did everything from welding to gardening and cleaning at the employer's home. We weren't treated as equals, and that shaped how I view work. After several years of hardship, I decided to leave the country with the help of smugglers. [...] I arrived in Sweden at the age of 19. Here I was met with safety, food, and respect. Despite several rejections, I received temporary residency through the upper secondary school law. I was hesitant about the Industrial Programme. I had bad experiences from workshop work. But after a study visit where the manager worked side by side with the employees and treated me with respect, I changed my mind. [...] Now I see the industry as a path to work and a future. I've been promised a job after graduation, and that gives me hope.

Sile's narrative articulates agency emerging from experiences of exploitation, loss, and reorientation. Narratively (intradiegetic), he positions himself as responsible and hardworking, yet also as someone who has been devalued and exploited. By recounting his background as a welder without pay or respect, he contrasts this with the dignity he encounters in Sweden, particularly during a study visit where the manager worked alongside the staff. This experience becomes a turning point where he renegotiates his relationship to the industry and sees education as a route to the future. In the storytelling situation (interactional), he shares his hesitation and changed perspective, creating a sense of closeness and understanding. This self-presentation functions as a narrative performance (Mishler, 1999) that repositions him vis-à-vis the audience and the industry. In relation to dominant discourses (discursive), the narrative challenges notions of migrants as passive or grateful recipients. Sile appears as a reflective actor seeking recognition through respectful practice. Resistance takes the form of reorientation: he chooses to return to a profession he previously associated with subordination, but does so on his own terms, enabling a new emergence as competent and recognised. Resistance is enacted as respectful reorientation: he returns to industry on new terms, narrating visibility through dignified practice (cf. Arendt, 1958).

Soren's narrative

Soren, who was 27 years old in 2024 when interviewed, shares:

I lost my father when I was young, and my brother and I started working to support the family. I welded on construction sites, often at high altitudes with only a rope for safety. The pay was low or non-existent. I repaired agricultural machinery and did technical jobs. I never went to school, but I learned to read and write through volunteer organisations. During my journey, I worked with car mechanics and took on temporary jobs. At the age of 13, I left my home country and arrived in Sweden alone at 15. [...] I lived with uncertainty for a long time, but eventually received temporary residency through the upper secondary school law. [...] Vocational education became my path to stability and a future. I was able to build on my skills, obtain permanent residency, and now work as a mechanical technician.

Soren's narrative articulates agency shaped through informal labour, loss, and self-directed learning. Narratively (intradiegetic), he positions himself as technically skilled and responsible, despite lacking formal schooling. By describing how he learned to read and write through volunteer organisations and worked with agricultural machinery and car mechanics, he appears

as someone who builds competence outside institutional frameworks. Vocational education in Sweden becomes a space where this experience is partially recognised and legitimised. In the act of narration (interactional), he describes his journey from uncertainty to stability, creating a narrative arc of development and hope. This arc operates as a narrative performance (Mishler, 1999) that renders his informal expertise and growth intelligible to the listener. In relation to dominant educational norms (discursive), the narrative challenges assumptions of education as solely formal; Soren shows how informal knowledge can serve as a foundation for recognition. Resistance takes the form of self-initiated competence-building and emergence through practice: he renegotiates his place in society by translating experience into legitimised competence, enabling both employment and residency. Resistance is enacted as self-initiated competence-building: informal expertise is translated into recognised competence and stability (cf. Arendt, 1958).

Nasna's narrative

Nasna, who was 28 years old in 2023 when interviewed, shares:

I came to Norway seven years ago, after completing parts of primary school in my home country. Here, I started with language training and then spent three years in primary school before applying to vocational education. I'm now in my second year of a programme to become a care assistant. I don't have much work experience from my home country, but I helped out in the family shop. In Norway, I've worked with children with autism and in retail, and now I work part-time in both places. A particularly meaningful experience was during my placement, when I was given responsibility for a patient. I got to use professional tools and write my own report. It felt like I truly became part of the profession. I felt appreciated and seen.

Nasna's narrative articulates agency emerging through education, placement, and relational work. Narratively (intradiegetic), she positions herself as learning and responsible, where the placement with her own patient becomes a turning point for appearing as a professional. By describing how she used tools and wrote a report, she appears as competent and recognised within a professional context. In the act of narration (interactional), she emphasises the feeling of being appreciated and seen, creating emotional resonance and legitimising her emergence. Such self-disclosure is a narrative performance (Mishler, 1999) that makes professional recognition narratively available. In relation to broader norms of integration and competence (discursive), the narrative shows how education and placement function as conditional pathways to recognition. Resistance takes the form of relational emergence: by actively participating in care practice and taking responsibility, Nasna challenges assumptions of migrants as dependent or invisible. In Arendt's terms, this is political action, a way of becoming visible as a subject in the public realm through care, responsibility, and participation. Resistance is enacted as relational emergence: responsibility in practice becomes a mode of appearing as a professional subject (cf. Arendt, 1958).

Noella's narrative

Noella, who was 49 years old in 2023 when interviewed, shares:

I didn't attend much school in my home country, but in Norway I started over. I learned the language, completed primary education, and am now enrolled in vocational training to become a

care assistant. I've cared for a child with a chronic illness for many years, which has given me substantial knowledge about care work, even though it's not formally recognised as experience. In Norway, I've also worked voluntarily and at a day centre for people with dementia. I've learned a lot, especially through conversations with patients. It's a workplace where you can ask questions and seek help, and that has made me feel secure. In the beginning, the language was difficult, but I dared to reach out to colleagues and patients. That helped me grow, both personally and professionally.

Noella's narrative articulates agency emerging through care work, language development, and social interaction. Narratively (intradiegetic), she positions herself as experienced and learning, where her previous care for a chronically ill child appears as informal competence that, while not formally recognised, shapes her professional identity. Through practice and voluntary work in Norway, new opportunities arise to appear as competent and confident. In the act of narration (interactional), Noella describes her journey from uncertainty to confidence, particularly through communicative acts such as reaching out to colleagues and patients. This communicative self-portrayal constitutes a narrative performance (Mishler, 1999) that positions her as a competent and trustworthy actor and creates a narrative of relational resistance, in which linguistic and social barriers are negotiated through active presence. In relation to broader integration norms (discursive), the narrative frames language development and participation in care practice as central conditions for recognition. Resistance takes the form of communicative agency: by using language and relationships as tools to be seen and heard, Noella renegotiates her place within the education system and the labour market. Resistance is enacted as communicative agency: reaching out to colleagues and patients co-constructs trust and recognition (cf. Arendt, 1958).

Nataha's narrative

Nataha, who was 39 years old in 2023 when interviewed, shares:

I have vocational education from my home country, where I earned a diploma as a secretary after upper secondary school. When I came to Norway in 2005, I stayed home with the children for many years, which made it difficult to establish myself in the labour market. It was hard, the language, family responsibilities, and lack of a network became barriers to moving forward. Through NAV, I participated in a course to become a kindergarten assistant. That led to a placement and later a temporary position in a preschool. The experience sparked my interest in working with children, and I decided to apply for adult education to become a child and youth worker. For me, education became a way to reclaim initiative after years of stagnation. During my placement, I formed a strong bond with an Arabic-speaking child. I was able to contribute to the child's sense of security by being present both linguistically and culturally. It made me feel seen as a competent and trustworthy adult. I felt that I truly emerged as an acting person within the educational environment.

Nataha's narrative articulates agency reclaimed after a period of stagnation, where migration entailed a loss of professional identity. Narratively (intradiegetic), she presents herself as competent yet marginalised by linguistic, familial, and structural barriers; adult education and a vocational diploma become tools to restore initiative and re-establish a professional role. In the storytelling situation (interactional), she recounts a placement with an Arabic-speaking child where cultural-linguistic competence fostered trust and recognition, a narrative performance that reclaims professional identity (Mishler, 1999). Discursively, the account intersects with norms around migrant women's roles and gendered entry points into care work; immigrant

women with young children face particular hurdles in access to employment (Integrerings- og mangfoldsdirektoratet, 2025). This pattern aligns with the gendered division of the dataset which shapes how resistance is narrated – Norwegian cases are coded female (care-related programmes) and Swedish cases are coded male (technical fields) (cf. Amble et al., 2023; Reisel et al., 2019). In Nataha's case, resistance is enacted as quiet perseverance and strategic reorientation, mobilising informal competence to renegotiate place within education and society. Such strategies resonate with origin-country norms of provision and caregiving (Eriksen & Sajjad, 2020). Read with Arendt (1958), cultural-linguistic presence becomes a resource for recognition.

Analytical themes

From the six narratives, three analytical themes emerge through which educational transitions are narratively enacted as positioning work: 1) appearance through action and speech, 2) plurality as a condition for recognition, and 3) education as an arena for negotiating the 'right to have rights'. These themes are read in relation to institutional arrangements such as placements, validation and guidance.

Appearance through action and speech

The narratives show how migrants appear as subjects by acting, speaking, and participating in educational practices. Sami and Sile align educational choices with experiential resources to pursue recognition, while Nasna and Noella describe responsibility in practice as a mode of visibility. In Arendt's terms, such speech and action constitute political appearance (Arendt, 1958), and in our material this appearance is situated within concrete arrangements like placements and guidance encounters.

Plurality as a condition for recognition

The narrators frame their experiences as unique yet embedded in a shared world where difference is a prerequisite for intersubjectivity (Arendt, 1978; Loidolt, 2017). By foregrounding informal competence, cultural presence, and relational work, the narratives show how plurality can become a resource for recognition, especially when institutions open for these experiences to count. In practice, this occurs when informal competence and linguistic-cultural presence are positioned as professional resources, for example through validation routines or division of labour in practice settings.

Education as an arena for the 'right to have rights'

The narratives depict education as a conditional pathway to recognition, residency, and participation. Soren and Sami link educational trajectories to legal status, while Nataha reclaims professional identity through adult education. In line with Arendt's analysis of statelessness (1951), education appears as a space where the 'right to have rights' is negotiated rather than given. In the narratives, this negotiation is tied to membership regimes and procedural gateways (residence-permit trajectories, entry rules to programmes, and recognition procedures) within which narrators position themselves.

VET as an arena for appearance, recognition and agency

Taken together, the themes depict VET as a relational setting where subjects appear in interaction with institutional conditions. Drawing on Arendt (1958), we attend to how subjects appear through action and speech in interaction with others and institutions. In line with Arendt's (1958) account of action and plurality, the narratives show how visibility, recognition, and responsibility are co-constructed in practice, and how these possibilities are conditioned by legal status and organisational procedures. Resistance is narrated through strategic choices, relational work, and the re-positioning of prior experience, challenging views that cast migrants as passive. In this sense, education is a space where people can speak and act and where the 'right to have rights' is negotiated in everyday arrangements.

Discussion

Access to education, placements and employment is positioned in relation to legal status, language requirements, and organisational procedures (Careja & Bevelander, 2018; Khaef, 2022; Saarela & Weber, 2017), while the 'right to have rights' is negotiated through membership regimes and procedural gateways (Arendt, 1951). Differences in national arrangements contextualise which forms of recognition (legal, institutional and relational) are narrated. In Norway, the Integreringsloven (2020) and the Opplæringslova (2023) organise competence mapping, guidance and assessment of prior learning, opening for full or partial recognition of courses and facilitating completion of upper secondary education. These arrangements orient pathways particularly for recent arrivals. In Sweden, the Skollag (2010:800) grants adults access to upper-secondary education, including vocational routes such as Yrkesvux. Policy connects language provision, workplace learning (APL), and validation, but recognition of prior learning is uneven and pathways into regulated professions differ across municipalities. These arrangements condition where recognition is attainable and how transitions are paced for different groups.

The narratives also reflect gendered VET arenas: male-coded technical fields in Sweden and female-coded care fields in Norway (Amble et al., 2023; Reisel et al., 2019). These arenas intersect with cultural norms around provision and caregiving (Eriksen & Sajjad, 2020), in relation to which the narrators position themselves when pursuing recognition in education and work. Against this structural backdrop, the narratives diverge across the two contexts. In the Norwegian narratives (Nasna, Noella, and Nataha), constraints are narrated in relation to family responsibilities, language barriers, and limited recognition. Their stories express a strong sense of family responsibility, internalised from childhood and central to identity. In the Swedish narratives (Sami, Sile, and Soren), participants narrate early work obligations to support their families, often under precarious conditions. This responsibility persists as they navigate new institutional conditions (limited labour-market openings, formal education requirements, and uncertain legal status) to which they narrate resistance. Despite these conditions, the stories articulate a will to contribute, seek recognition and build a future through work, revealing a tension between expectations of self-sufficiency and limited openings. Read comparatively, these patterns illustrate how appearance and recognition are conditional not only on membership regimes and organisational procedures (cf. Arendt, 1951; 1958) but also on gendered VET arenas and pathways (cf. Amble et al., 2023; Reisel et al., 2019).

Migrants navigating education and labour markets in Sweden and Norway often narrate advanced problem-solving in unfamiliar linguistic, institutional, and social environments, yet their competencies are frequently overlooked, which limits access to resources and obscures situated expertise (Csapó & Funke, 2017; Utdanningsdirektoratet [Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training], 2020). In our material, adaptation, pursuit of education, and establishment are narrated as resilience and adaptive competence (traits associated with future-oriented learning), and the narratives demonstrate how agency and resistance are co-constructed in practice. Comparable Nordic findings point in the same direction. Return-to-profession trajectories are narrated through the mobilisation of experiential capital and enabling encounters with mentors, supervisors, and programme staff who make specific placements and recognition procedures tangible (cf. Eliasson et al., 2022). Such encounters can become decisive by re-positioning narrators as competent and trustworthy in situated institutional interactions (cf. Eliasson, 2024).

UNESCO (2015) and the United Nations (2023) emphasise that participation in learning and work requires enabling conditions such as education, recognition and inclusion. When these conditions are not fulfilled, responsibility can become a quiet struggle for visibility and belonging. The picture is sharpened by socioeconomic indicators. Immigrants are over-represented below the poverty threshold in both countries, around 26–27 percent versus about 10 percent for the general population in Norway, and 37–40 percent versus 15 percent in Sweden (European Anti-Poverty Network, 2019; Statista, 2024). UN bodies emphasise that inclusive and equitable education, together with opportunities for lifelong learning, are crucial for adult learners in vulnerable positions (FN-sambandet [UN Association of Norway], 2025). In this light, resilience is both personal and societal. Opportunities to develop and apply resilience through learning and participation strengthen inclusion and promote shared responsibility (Luthar et al., 2000; Waugh & Sali, 2023). Read with Arendt's account (1958), appearing as a subject presupposes recognition, and the narratives show how work and education are mobilised as strategies of visibility, while insufficient institutional support risks leaving responsibility invisible and politically ineffective.

The narrated invisibility described above therefore resonates with Eriksen and Sajjad's (2020) analysis of symbolic power and subtle discrimination in Norway. Through everyday scenes (bank visits, job interviews, social settings), they show how immigrants are positioned as second-class citizens not by explicit exclusion but via culturally coded acts that communicate subordination. Such marginalisation ties recognition to assimilation and to asymmetries of knowledge. As Eriksen and Sajjad (2020) put it: "Den sterke part i et ujevnt maktforhold vet nesten alltid mindre om den svake enn den svake vet om den sterke" (p. 8) – "The dominant party in an unequal power relationship almost always knows less about the weaker party than the weaker party knows about the dominant one." Arendt's (1951) account suggests that active citizenship as narrated here is not mere participation but recognition as subjects with a right to act, and ultimately a 'right to have rights'. Understanding how this possibility is narrated requires attention to research on migrant positioning within education and society. Studies repeatedly show that migrants are frequently treated as targets of intervention rather than as actors with strategies of their own (Levitt & Schiller, 2004; Triandafyllidou & Kumar, 2024). Our analysis nuances this picture by showing how resistance is articulated through storytelling and practice, where narrators position themselves vis-à-vis institutional expectations.

Resistance in our material is narrated in multiple forms, including relational work, strategic reorientation, and quiet perseverance, and it functions as position-taking to renegotiate identity and seek recognition (Asghari, 2025; Stiklestad & Monrad-Krohn, 2025). These enactments reflect active negotiation within educational and societal arrangements and reveal a capacity for adaptation and growth. Read alongside resilience, resistance can be understood as a dynamic process of positive adjustment under constraint, not merely endurance (Luthar et al., 2000), and as involving learning, responding and developing through adversity (Waugh & Sali, 2023). Framing resistance with resilience clarifies how narrators mobilise inner and relational resources to create space for agency and recognition within constrained contexts. Rugkåsa (2010) shows how institutional practices can both enable and constrain emergence. Our narratives similarly indicate that migrants act within such structures by mobilising linguistic, cultural and practical competence, particularly in Norwegian care-related settings where relational learning enables visibility (Stiklestad & Monrad-Krohn, 2025). In line with critiques of integration as a linear, technical process (Osman, 2024; Terås et al., 2024), the material foregrounds plurality and experiential knowledge as resources that challenge narrow definitions of legitimate competence. Read with Arendt (1958) and Loidolt (2017), plurality is a condition for political coexistence and can become a resource for recognition when institutions allow difference to operate, yet it is often sidelined when prior work experience is discounted or when language-related delays arise. Education therefore appears as an ambivalent arena that can provide pathways to visibility and recognition or reproduce exclusion, prompting democratic and recognition-related questions about securing space for subjects with the 'right to have rights' (cf. Arendt, 1951). On balance, the narratives depict educational transitions as political action in which speech, practice and relationships are mobilised to create meaning, enact resistance and pursue recognition. VET appears not only as a site for developing skills but as a space where plurality, responsibility and agency are activated and negotiated.

Conclusion

This study shows that migrants' narratives about educational transitions encompass more than individual experiences, as they articulate resistance, recognition, and agency in relation to institutional conditions. By combining Arendt's political philosophy with narrative positioning analysis, we have highlighted how vocational education can function as an arena for subjective emergence, but also how this possibility is conditional and sometimes delayed. To strengthen migrants' capacity to act, educational environments must recognise plurality and ensure that the 'right to have rights' is not only legal, but also pedagogical and relational. Further research should explore how different educational practices, particularly within adult education, can be designed to support such emergence, and how institutional structures shape the possibility of recognition in different national contexts.

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