"I NEVER WANT TO LOSE THAT KEY":
on school as an opportunity structure for unaccompanied refugee children in Sweden

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Abstract

In recent years, a large number of refugee children have arrived in Sweden. In this article, 15 Afghan boys tell us about their normative longing for education and schooling (*should*), their experiences of school as an opportunity structure (*being*) and the resilience of their personal agency as regards succeeding in school (*doing*). Our empirical data indicate that, particularly thanks to the efforts of many individual teachers, the boys' *should*, *being* and *doing* are connected and relatively strong. Nevertheless, school as an opportunity structure also entails challenges: an overly one-sided concentration on the Swedish language as well as frequent absence of multilingual classroom assistants, native language instruction, and inclusion. At the same time, the boys long for and work hard to achieve school success. Strong resilience is not individual, however; it works in connection with a preserved *should* and a strongly developed, activating *being*.

Keywords

Newly arrived students • Unaccompanied refugee children • Scaffolding • School opportunity structure • School achievement

Introduction

In this article, the reader will meet 15 unaccompanied refugee children. They are all boys from Afghanistan who came to Sweden in 2011 and 2012.[1] Upon arrival, they were 15 and 16 years of age and separated from their parents. In addition, they had no adult who was legally responsible for them. Responsibility for their rights and well-being was therefore delegated to a number of representatives of society, primarily, a social worker, a legal assistant, a trustee, school staff and assistants at their residence. When unaccompanied

refugee children reach the age of 18 years, thus becoming adults in the legal sense, this responsibility ceases (Backlund *et al.* 2012).

Our empirical focus is primarily on these boys' experiences of their first time in school in Sweden, as seen in relation to their hopes for and previous experiences of education and schooling as well as their own driving forces and ambitions. Thus, this article is motivated by three *research questions*. First, what ideas and hopes concerning education and schooling do these unaccompanied refugee boys entertain when they arrive in Sweden? This question concerns their *normative longing*. Second, how do they describe, understand and judge the school system they encounter during the first period following arrival? In this case, the question concerns school as an *opportunity structure* for school success. Third, what amount of motivation and effort are the boys able to mobilize for school success and active citizenship in society as a whole. This last question concerns *the resilience of agency*. The relations between the answers to these questions are of particular interest, that is, the *relational complex* that concerns what we refer to as the boys' *should*, *being* and *doing*: what they long for, the school conditions they actually have access to, and the energy they are able to mobilize in their lived contexts in Sweden.

Before answering our deeply interlaced questions, we will introduce research on what best promotes school success and resilience for newly arrived students. We will also need to describe the boys in question as well as our methodological approach.

School as an opportunity structure for the newly arrived

In *Flerspråkiga elever* [*Multilingual students*], Cummins (2017) summarizes the last four decades of research on the level of language and knowledge development that newly arrived students need to achieve school success (see also Bunar 2010, 2015; Nilsson & Bunar 2016; Hagström 2018; Svensson & Eastwood 2013). What is, to use Cummins' term, the nature of the *scaffolding* the school provides that successfully mobilizes these students' learning? Living conditions outside school and childhood experiences can certainly influence school results but, as Cummins (2017: 27) emphasizes, "the students are disadvantaged only when school fails to deal with them properly or even strengthens the negative effects of broader social factors".

At the centre of Cummins' synthesized understanding of scaffolding are primarily the teachers' *teaching* and the children's *learning*: the idea that new knowledge and skills are integrated with the children's previous knowledge. To understand how teaching may become learning, we construct, informed by Cummins' work, 10 *elementary forms* that determine what makes a school a supportive *opportunity structure* for newly arrived students' school success. The first five forms constitute *the cognitive dimension* of the structure. The next five forms refer to the forms that markedly contribute to cognitive development without themselves being cognitive in nature. These constitute the structure's *non-cognitive dimension*. Once the dimensions are established, the focus turns to the relations between them, which enables us to understand different types of more or less supportive opportunity structures.

The cognitive dimension

The first cognitive elementary form concerns the importance of developing newly arrived students' *knowledge-related language*, that is, language that will allow them to understand and assimilate instruction in all subjects. In other words, everyday language fluency is not equivalent to the knowledge-related language required to speak, read and write successfully at school. If it takes 2 years to achieve viable everyday language proficiency, knowledge-related language mastery takes at least 5 years to develop. To succeed in this, it is best to invest in both *Swedish* and *native language* skills. The reason for this is that the knowledge and skills the students bring with them to Sweden are encoded in the language they learned as children. Learning new words, concepts and phrases in the second language thus means understanding their meaning in the first, native language. That is why it is useful to exploit and develop students' multilingual repertoire such that words and concepts are explained and transferred between the languages in both directions. And this applies to all subjects. Here, we are dealing with the third cognitive element, which concerns continuous *translanguaging* (see also García & Wei 2014; Svensson 2017). In addition, as the fourth cognitive element, it is important to strengthen students' knowledge-related language in all *subject areas*. This requires support of knowledge in Swedish, the native language and translanguaging for a period of several years. This is also important in preventing newly arrived students from falling behind in their knowledge acquisition when their mastery of Swedish is still not sufficient to achieve the school's academic goals. Delaying subject-specific knowledge acquisition until the newly arrived students are able to assimilate it using more academic Swedish is, thus, devastating to their knowledge development. Consequently, professional *multilingual classroom assistants* [studiehandledare] are also required. This fifth cognitive element enables supportive translanguaging aimed at developing both language and subject-specific knowledge and the relation between them.

The non-cognitive dimension

The first non-cognitive elementary form refers to having positive and high *expectations* concerning newly arrived students' willingness and capacity to learn. This presumes having knowledgeable and pedagogically competent teachers who are *committed to* these students' cognitive development and their social and emotional wellbeing. This commitment constitutes the second form of the non-cognitive dimension which, in turn, presupposes the development of a third form, namely solid *social relationships* between teachers and students. Cummins holds that human relationships are as or more important to students' commitment than the teaching strategies themselves are. Because "strong relationships often carry more weight than the economically and socially disadvantaged situation many newly arrived students find themselves in" (2017: 17). The fourth elementary form concerns understanding and recognition of the newly arrived students' *identity negotiations*, that is, questions of who they are and who they want to be, in their own eyes as well as the eyes of teachers and other students. In this connection, it is important that these students

be recognized as resources in these negotiations because they will be more trusting and committed to schoolwork if they feel at home in their school, if their experiences are valued and if their forms of self-understanding, both in terms of being and becoming, are acknowledged (see also Mohme 2016; Lund & Trondman 2017; Sharif 2017). Teaching that is sensitive and connects with the newly arrived students' own lives, driving forces and ambitions is therefore a good thing. What most certainly causes newly arrived students to lose interest in education and schooling is to disparage their expectations, commitments, capabilities, experiences and forms of self-understanding. Thus, the relationships between teachers, other students and newly arrived students are never neutral. Consequently, the fifth elementary form, *power relations*, must be raised to the level of consciousness and challenged. It is, then, important that newly arrived students take part in shaping the organization, instruction and forms of communication (see also Svensson 2017).

Relations between the dimensions

To understand analytically how opportunity structures can, in various respects, provide strong or weak support, we will, in a first step, construct a *two-by-two diagram*. The *a* panel of the diagram contains a structure that is unambiguously strong, meaning that both the cognitive and the non-cognitive dimensions are present. This first type is a *doubly scaffolding* opportunity structure. Panel *b* features the encounter of a strong cognitive and a weak non-cognitive dimension, making the opportunity structure one-sidedly strong. This second type, then, only offers a *cognitively scaffolding* opportunity structure. The third type is inversely one-sided. In the *c* panel, only a *non-cognitively scaffolding* opportunity structure is present. Finally, both the cognitive and the non-cognitive dimensions are weak in panel *d,* which makes for a *non-scaffolding* opportunity structure.

In the second step, we understand that the best thing for the newly arrived students' school success is to encounter a doubly scaffolding opportunity structure, since here the student's own learning is activated by all 10 elementary forms. This is, then, *theoretically desirable on empirical grounds.*

		1. Cognitive dimension	
2. Non-cognitive dimension		**STRONG**	**WEAK**
	STRONG	a. Strong opportunity structure	b. One-sidedly strong, non-cognitive opportunity structure
	WEAK	c. One-sidedly strong, cognitive opportunity structure	d. Weak opportunity structure

We can, then, in a third step understand the relations between the dimensions in terms of *interdependency.* In our reading of Cummins, we understand the cognitively scaffolding dimension to be absolutely necessary. To achieve school success, newly arrived students

need to develop a strong knowledge-related language and good subject-specific knowledge. At the same time, this is not enough because development of these students' cognitive capacity is greatly supported by non-cognitive scaffolding. Thus, whereas even the latter dimension is necessary, it cannot be sufficient. The reason is that we cannot imagine strong support for newly arrived students' school success without a strongly scaffolding cognitive dimension. The dimensions are, consequently, *mutually dependent*.

Three kinds of *empirical complexity* can now be added to our core construction. The first complexity refers to *variations within the respective dimensions*, for example, a school's teaching of Swedish may be good but translanguaging weak due to non-existent native language instruction and student guidance. There may also be schools and teachers who are good at language teaching but less good at social relationships or challenging power relations. In other words, there may be *variations between the dimensions*. Finally, students may understand and handle different types and degrees of support in different ways. It is here we arrive at our particular interest in *the resilience of agency*.

Unaccompanied refugee children and resilience

According to Rutter (2013: 34), resilience refers to the "relative resistance" individuals or groups mobilize to deal with life's challenges and dangers and to enable "a relatively good outcome." This includes "flexible responses to varying circumstances", "a capacity to derive advantages from opportunities", "a self-reflective style that facilitates learning from experience" and "a commitment in relationships, solidarity and competence" (Rutter 2013: 40). Consequently, unaccompanied refugee children's resilience refers to the active agency they are able to mobilize when dealing with the challenges and strains that flight and life in a new country entail. This is what Ni Ragahallaigh and Gillian (2010: 227) refer to as "how children respond to the challenges caused by forced migration and the fact that many become *active survivors* rather than *passive victims*." It is clear, however, that whether the result *turns out* one way or another, or whether it is more or less permanent, is not given when a child on the run arrives in a new country. Nor can the outcome be reduced to individual responsibility or competence. Thus, the dynamics of the resilience of agency must be understood in a complex and interactive manner (Jahanmahan & Bunar 2018). This means that resilience is not primarily a personal quality but a *process of becoming*. Resilience, then, is not a permanent quality that exists or does not exist in an individual. Rather, it is something that an individual acquires or does not acquire to varying extents. In addition, resilience can be preserved, lost and regained over time by more or less *active individuals*.

Resilience, as becoming and as activity, must also be understood as embedded to different degrees in activating *lived contexts*, *influences* and *social relations*. This is because, as mentioned, opportunity structures can also vary with respect to strength and outcome, which makes resilience, as an outcome, a question of *individual variations* that interact with the strength of opportunity structures (Rutter 2013). It is therefore important to emphasize

the context dependence of resilience without disregarding individual differences, even when a specific opportunity structure is the same. In this article, we are primarily interested in how the resilience of agency can find support in varyingly strong opportunity structures (see also Cohen 2013; de Wal Pastoor 2015).

In the same sense, Swidler (2013) argues for the importance of not just emphasizing the capacities of individuals but those of institutions as well. "Creating or preserving resilient social forms that embody collective aims", she writes, "strengthens rights and obligations" (2013: 319). And that kind of *social resilience*, as she puts it, is based on a common belief in all people's "mutual dependence on each other" (2013: 320). This refers to, in the present case, having a strongly scaffolding opportunity structure for newly arrived students' school success, especially in terms of having an effective "school ethos" (Rutter 2013).

Material, method and knowledge claims

Qualitative interviews with 15 unaccompanied 15- to 17-year-old refugee boys, from Afghanistan, constitute the empirical material for this study. They were recruited by the first author through trustees, residential facility staff or an association for unaccompanied refugee children in Sweden. Before fleeing and seeking asylum in Sweden, most of them had fled to Iran, or in a few cases to Pakistan, where they lived for longer or shorter periods of time. They speak Dari and Persian. At the time of their respective interviews during the period 2012–2014, none of them had been in Sweden for more than about 2 years. At the time of the interviews, they were all attending different schools in two relatively large municipalities. Most of them had done so for at least two semesters.

This strategic sample is justified with primarily six arguments. First, the boys represent the quantitatively largest group of unaccompanied refugee children in Sweden, namely those from Afghanistan. In addition, boys make up the majority of this group (*Swedish Migration Board* 2017). Second, the first author of this article is a Persian speaker. The boys were thus able to speak in a language through which they could much more easily describe their experiences of childhood and adolescence, flight and schooling. The third argument for including these boys in the study was that the interviewer had a similar refugee background, a fact that, due to shared experiences, increased their trust in him. Fourth, unaccompanied refugee children depend on the support and responsibility of different social institutions, which is well suited to our main interest in the role of the schools. In addition, our fifth argument is that the boys had received a permanent residence permit by the time of the interviews. This means that the refugee situation was over for them, which opens up new perspectives in relation to the past, the present and the future. Thus, and finally, investing in education becomes an important determining factor for their life in Sweden.

The data collection applies what can best be described as a life-history approach (Goodson & Numan 2003; Trondman 1994), meaning that the semi-structured interviews concern all phases of the migration ecology, that is, pre-, trans- and post-migration (Nilsson

& Bunar 2016). In other words, the interviews concern the boys' childhood and adolescence – mostly so, family, religion, work, education, leisure and political situation – as well as their experiences of flight and encountering new societal institutions in a new country. The principal focus of this study, though, is limited to the children's experiences of schooling in the post-migration phase, and particularly so those empirical themes that make up the answers to our research question on normative longing, opportunity structure and resilience. However, this does not preclude their experiences of and longing for education and schooling in both the pre- and trans-migration phase. The length of the interviews varies from 1 to 2 hours. For ethical reasons, the names of the boys as well as towns, regions and schools involved are fictive.

A statement concerning the knowledge claims of the study is called for. The life-history approach offers access to the narratives of a limited number of boys. These narratives are based on the recollections and experiences the boys stressed in conversations with the first author, that is, what the boys wanted and were able to talk about. These are the narratives we theorize as the relational complex of normative longing, opportunity structure and resilience.

Education and schooling as normative longing

For these boys, education is very important and decisive. They "want to study", "want to learn" and "want to develop." Indeed, the boys' normative longing for education and schooling is very strong and carries many reasons.

"That's why school is so very important to me"

"Had she had an education", Danis says of his mother, "she wouldn't have had to toil in a factory." He shares this experience with the other boys, as none of their parents has an education of any length. Most of the time, education is very scanty or lacking entirely. Illiteracy is widespread. The boys' parents, if alive, are almost all poor farm labourers, factory or construction workers who put in long and hard working days for their livelihood. One initial reason for the boys' longing, then, is their parents' lack of education.

Danis' mother "tried to do all she could" so he would have the "opportunity to go to school." Indeed, the boys' parents want their children to get an education, and did what they could to make it possible. For various reasons, however, schooling of any length was not possible, often because they had no access to a school. Or the parents could not afford to send their children to the school that did exist. Regardless of money, they may not have had permission to put their children in existing schools. In addition, war and flight may have prevented school enrolment. The parents' strong educational hopes for their children thus constitute an additional reason for the boys' normative longing.

"Before I came to Sweden I hadn't gotten much education", Mehdi says. This, as mentioned, is an experience he shares with the other boys. "We come from a country", Bevar

states, "where we grew up as poor farmers, and we couldn't read, we couldn't write." In Iran too, where he was forced to flee to save his life, he failed to find any education opportunities. Survival meant hard physical work and nothing else. None of the boys, then, has gone to school for more than 5 years. In many cases, their time at school is shorter than that, or more or less non-existent. Even for the boys who have gone to school for a few years, schooling has been irregular and limited. This concerns both the length and content of a school day, for instance having only a few subjects or all instruction being about the Koran. Accordingly, a third reason for the boys' normative longing is inadequate access to schooling.

"School is a place where you can always learn things", Farid says. This fact, according to Milan, gives "going to school" a "special meaning." It is about "entering a different, alternative setting." In such a setting, Farid specifies, "there are many opportunities." A fourth reason for the boys' normative longing is that they see school as a desirable setting for learning.

"Education, that's the way to achieve goals"

"I want to change my life through education", Mehran asserts. Indeed, the boys' desire for change is clear and very strong. "My dream", as Hamid says, "is to become someone, so I can change my life." As an individual, the ambition is to make yourself into the means to achieve meaningful goals: to become someone you are not now but want to be.

One of the many relevant answers is learning. "Every school day", Mehdi clarifies, "you learn new things." Another answer is thinking. "Because with learning", Milan insists, "you begin to think differently", which enables both autonomy and participation in society. "Because", Mehdi says, "I want to be an independent human being who can stand on his own two feet, so I don't slip and fall when I enter society." This concerns status and equality as well. Farzad thinks that education entails having "a standing in society" because then "you become somebody for life." In Mehdi's words, education is about "being equal to others." "Because", Farid reflects, "if you don't go to school and educate yourself, you don't exist in society." "I hope", Milan points out, "that I can become a valuable human being." And as the boys see things, being valuable in their own eyes, as well as the eyes of others, is also important to one's wellbeing. "Because you don't always have positive thoughts", Bevar states, continuing: "but if you go to school and study, then you don't have bad thoughts, instead you have good ones." "Through education", Hamid thinks, "you can become a good person who won't have to suffer, somebody who no one can hurt, and somebody who won't torment others." Consequently, the boys regard education as means to a number of connected ends related to *personal development*.

"By going to school", Hamid emphasizes, "you get to know others." "I can meet young people there", Ahmed explains, adding, "I want to know about the things they do and what they think." And in this way, the boys mobilize an affiliation to a network of friends. Thus, the boys regard schooling as a means to develop *social relationships and networks* as well. Because if they have these resources, they will be able to handle loneliness, generate social energies and have a sense of belonging. In that way, they hope to gain access to and

participate in society as a whole, that is, beyond their residential facility, their Afghan friends and the school.

"To me", Farid says, "school is very important. Because I want to go on to high school." Almost all of them want to continue to the university level. Farman is certain that "if you are successful at school, you can get a good job." And, in turn, a job is the way to an independent personal economy, acquiring your own home and being able to raise a family. Therefore, education is, for all of them, a way of making investments in *future life chances*.

"I dream", Danis says, "about helping others who need help." So that, as Bevar says, "they too can improve themselves and their opportunities." By getting an education, developing and building social relationships and networks for their own life chances, the boys think they can even become the means for other young people who also want to achieve desirable goals. For sure, the boys' desire for *solidarity* is strong.

"I want to engage in society", says Malik, continuing, "I want to be able to work for Swedish society. If possible, I want to be a politician." Hamid says that he "wants to live in Sweden and I want to do something with Sweden." Indeed, the boys' dream – to do something *in, for and with* Sweden – is a dream about active *citizenship*.

The activating meaning system of normative longing

There are two insights that allow us to understand why the boys' longing for education and schooling is so strong. First, there is an evident lack of such opportunities in their previous lives. They long for what they have not had but want to have, namely schooling that offers the means to achieving the personal, relational and societal goals just mentioned. Second, they long to become the individuals they do not feel they are now, namely educated flourishing citizens with standing who can change other individuals as well as society. Let us refer to these two explanations as *the vital centre of normative longing*. Such a centre works as an activating meaning system, as an external, motivating force for the boys' desire and ability to act in relation to education and schooling, that is, to get hold of the *key* they do not want to lose.

School as an opportunity structure

"I can go to school, and school is good", says Mehran. "Because there are", Farman stresses, "many good opportunities in the Swedish school system." Thus, the boys' basically positive judgement applies to the school as an opportunity structure.

"I really like my teachers a lot"

"The teachers are very good", Rahmat emphasizes, and the other boys confirm, because, as Mehran puts it, "the teachers teach very well." And, hence, he has "learnt a lot."

Consequently, the boys feel they "receive", as Danis asserts, "assistance and support." As the boys view it, their first period of schooling in Sweden has largely involved *teaching* that has led to *learning*. "Most of the teachers *explain* things well", Rahmat says, mentioning his math teacher as an example.

> He explains each assignment three times, then he lets us work out the solution. He says, "Come to me if you have a problem. I'll help you." Teachers like that are good people. They explain their subjects.

Farzad thinks about his Swedish teacher, who explains the subject matter well and shows the students *how* they can develop their language skills.

> He really explains his lessons very well. He also teaches us what to do to learn Swedish better. This lets us learn it really well.

Malik, too, emphasizes the teachers' ability to explain the subject matter well, relating this to the development of each student's *independent thinking*. "Because", he says, "they teach in a way that makes you understand everything and makes you think for yourself."

"What I like", Milan explains, "is that the teachers pep us up and believe in us." He goes on to say, "This makes me curious about the subject, and then I can learn more." This also means that the teachers demonstrate a high degree of *confidence in* the boys' *cognitive ability*, which strongly contributes to their already high level of *motivation*.

Mehdi's experience is that "the teachers really try hard and exert themselves to make us understand." Farzad speaks with great satisfaction about one teacher "who tells the whole class that he is fighting for us to learn good Swedish and be a part of society." The boys undoubtedly sense their teachers' *commitment* to them learning and thriving.

According to Milan, "the fact that the teachers spend a lot of time explaining so that we as students can get the subject right" means "that they really care about us." The teachers' *caring* attitude concerns not only the boys' learning but also their personal wellbeing. "Our teacher likes us a lot", Rahmat emphasizes. "Every day he goes to school he's happy."

The boys also emphasize the teachers' *patience*. "The teachers have a lot of patience", Jamal says. He goes on to say:

> If a student doesn't understand after ten explanations, the teachers explain it ten times more ... until the student understands. That's great. The teachers don't say: 'I've explained it to you three times, and I won't do it a fourth. You'll have to learn it on your own.

It is not difficult to understand that the boys experience *advancement* in their learning. Talking about this, Milan emphasizes the importance of the teachers' knowledge, pedagogical skills and treatment of students – factors that are not experienced as separate from teaching and learning.

> For example, our teacher taught us "that is a ball, this is a house, this is a bicycle." He taught us vocabulary. Then, slowly but surely, he constructed sentences. And then we wrote sentences. The more we advanced, the more he raised the bar. The lessons became more and more difficult. The teacher knew how to teach.

The boys are not only satisfied with how most of their teachers talk *to* and *with* them but also how they talk *about* them. Milan expresses this as follows:

> We have teachers who say that Afghan children are very gifted. I asked why. They say that when Swedish students begin high school they've be going to school for ten years, whereas Afghans begin high school after three or four years. Thus, Afghan students catch up quickly. We're good at learning.

Consequently, the boys feel the teachers convey a positive *collective representation*, which reinforces the boys' ability to be – in terms of self-understanding and action –successful students with acknowledged value and ability. This, in addition, reinforces their feeling of school belonging, self-confidence and wellbeing in learning and life.

"You first have to learn the Swedish language"

"In the first year, I studied only Swedish", Mehran says, adding, "All schoolwork was oriented towards learning the language." Rahmat shares this experience. "The school taught us Swedish", he says. "We learned words, sentences, grammar, presentations, poems." This highly concentrated focus on the Swedish language is part of the boys' common experience. Nevertheless, in the first year, some of them got to try other subjects to a certain extent, mostly Math and English.

"The language is extremely important. You must learn the language", Rahmat says. This conviction is shared by all of the boys. Mehran expresses it in the following way:

> To me and to most Afghan young people, learning Swedish is very important. I go in for the Swedish language one hundred percent. I must learn Swedish well enough to have language skills so I can manage school, make contacts and communicate with people.

"How else can I understand what's going on at school?" Mehran asks. He answers himself, "Because I have to get an education. I must work hard at school. How else will I get a job?" And, "I'm in Sweden now", he emphasis, "I must get to know the Swedes."

Learning Swedish *first* – that is the school's principal message as well. "Since if you don't know the language", Jamal explains, "the teachers' priority is to teach the language to the students. But if the student knows the language, then the teachers prioritize teaching other subjects." Consequently, as students, the boys live in a world where the Swedish language is clearly separated from other subjects during the first phase of schooling.

The opportunity structure's activating meaning system

We have thus established that the boys are highly satisfied with their education and schooling. They understand school as the alternative setting in which they can mobilize themselves to achieve what they want to achieve as individuals and citizens. Thus, so far their normative longing's vital centre has been matched by the meaning system we now refer to as *the opportunity structure's vital centre*. Thus, the *should* of normative longing is largely identical to the *being* of lived experience. Their faith in what they long for has also become faith in what they have access to.

When the opportunity structure breaks

Nonetheless, four areas of criticism recur in our interviews with the boys.

"You get to sit in the classroom playing on you own"

"There are teachers", Farid states, "who come into the classroom, sit down on a chair behind a table" and say, "You get to work on you own, raise your hand if you have any questions." The boys are not satisfied with those kinds of teachers. And it was for precisely such reasons Farzad was very upset with one of his teachers.

> He sat on a chair all the time. We had no schedule for the various subjects. The teacher said, "You get to sit in the classroom and play on you own." But you don't go to school to play. You go there to study.

There are also some teachers who show no understanding of the boys' life situation. "In my experience", Farid says, "some teachers treat us students badly. They don't understand us when we're not doing well."

"No, I haven't had that, and still don't"

In the boys' view, when they begin to study other subjects than Swedish, their learning would be greatly facilitated if there were multilingual classroom assistants who could explain things in the boys' native language *and* in Swedish. But only two of the boys reported having access to such assistants and, hence, translanguaging during their first 2 years in Sweden. "We have", Rahmat says, "a multilingual classroom assistant who comes once a week." He is very satisfied with the situation. "Because he comes and explains the things we didn't understand in Swedish." Milan, too, has experiences of a multilingual classrooms assistant, but that resource has now been taken away. "It was good", he says. "She was friendly. She was really good at explaining different subjects to us."

"I want to focus on my Swedish instead"

Mehran is one of only two boys who, after 2 years in Sweden, do study his native language. He is very happy about this, especially because his language teacher also acts as a multilingual classroom assistant and, hence, a translanguaging resource.

> We have native language classes. We can talk about anything, really, and we have an excellent teacher. His teaching methods are good, and so is the homework he gives us. Also, he often helps us with Swedish grammar. He explains it in Persian, which makes it easier to understand and learn Swedish. We practice and learn things easily.

The rest of the boys do not study their native language. The most common reason for this is that native language courses have not been available or that the ones who were did not work out very well for them, most often due to a too high academic level and lack of didactic support. The consequence of all this is that almost all of the boys think it is better to concentrate only on the Swedish language – so that they can "cope with school", "speak with Swedish people" and "get a job in Sweden." That is how they have come to think. "When I've learned Swedish", Mehdi summarizes, "I can start studying my native language again."

It seems to us that the boys have not necessarily rejected the available native language studies, but rather the content and instruction they have received, which do not correspond very well with their needs. Therefore, the lack of multilingual classroom assistants might not be compensated for by the presence of native language teachers.

"There are great differences"

"There are students", Hamid tells us in a concerned tone of voice, "who come and go to classes as they please" and who "shout and yell and disturb others. That makes teaching difficult." He goes on to say:

> I observe all this. I can see the different individuals. Then you must choose sides. You can behave either like the people who disturb or watch movies *or* like those who struggle hard with their studies in order to get somewhere.

Rahim, too, attends a "rowdy school." After 2 years in Sweden, he has realized that there are other school settings. "Compared to other schools", he says, "students here have very little motivation for studying." "There are, you know", he emphasizes, "great differences between schools, and the people in the schools understand the differences." "But actually", Rahim remarks, "there shouldn't be any differences between schools." "Why is it", he wonders, "that the majority of kids who do well at school don't want to go to my school?" He is very critical of this division. "Because", he goes on, "we live in a country where we are equal before the law. So the schools must offer education of equal quality." "Your success as a student", Farman points out, "may depend on which school you go to." So, he says, "I need

to work more."

Some of the boys, though, go to schools where, according to Rahmat, "most students are Swedish. But all of the immigrants are placed in two separate classes." "That's no good", he says, even if the school is "very quiet, everybody studies and students are treated well." Farid too, who is otherwise happy with his calm and quiet school, has had the same experience, in that "all refugee kids who don't speak Swedish have been brought together in one class." "We learn the meaning of words", he explains, "but we never use those words when we communicate with each other or with others." Regardless of which school they attend, the boys lack opportunities to talk to students whose native language is Swedish, and they want to interact with Swedish students. According to Farid, that is the reason why "language instruction should be integrated with the Swedish classes at an earlier stage." "Because", he emphasizes, "we want to live in Sweden."

The activating meaning system of shortcomings

Generally speaking, the boys have given up on their native language instruction to concentrate on Swedish. Multilingual classroom assistants and translanguaging are clearly absent. It also happens that they encounter the occasional teacher who does not live up to their expectations. Furthermore, after 2 years in Sweden, the boys have learned that they go to schools characterized by *distinctions*, that is, schools where what they describe as "Swedish students" are kept apart in separate schools, in separate parts of the school building and in separate classrooms. The boys have thus realized that their schooling does not necessarily amount to an equal education because an increasing number of successful students attend certain schools, whereas many others, who are still struggling or who have given up, go to other schools. The boys have also learned that this distinction is largely *ethnifying* such that the category "immigrant" stands for "inadequacy" and "problem" and the category "Swedish" stands for "opportunities" (Trondman 2006). Consequently, they have become increasingly conscious of a third activating meaning system, namely *the ethnified meaning system of problem categorization*, which runs the risk of challenging what we call their *should* and their *being*. When this happens, according to Farzad, "difficulties arise that I have to deal with." In this way, the order of social organization and negative representation becomes an *individualized problem* that is reduced to *individual responsibility*.

Conclusions

The boys' narratives are clearly held up by an impassioned and persistent *doing*. But *the resilience of agency* does not emerge on its own, it is connected to a highly activating *should* and a variable *being*.

As pointed out earlier, the boys' strong normative longing for education and schooling. They longed for what they and their parents did not have. Thus, education and schooling become the means to achieving a series of ends: everything from personal development,

social relationships and future life chances to achieving solidarity with other exposed groups and individuals as well as active citizenship. Here, the resilience of agency is embedded in the boys' lived longing and search for education and schooling. This is *the encapsulated resilience of normative longing*, that is, a very strong yearning to gain access to school as an opportunity structure.

We then learned how the school served as a collection of scaffolding opportunity structures that the boys judged very favourably, on the whole – not least because the encapsulated resilience of normative longing, which the boys brought with them to Sweden, was matched to a high degree by the education and schooling they had hoped for so earnestly. In the boys' experience, the *should* of normative longing became largely *identical* to the *being* of lived experience. In this way, the encapsulated resilience of normative longing became *the opportunity structure's realized resilience*.

In the third part of our study, we became familiar with the shortcomings made visible by the boys' criticism of school as an opportunity structure. We learned about individual teachers who did not live up to the boys' expectations, about the absence of the absence of multilingual classroom assistants and about both the absence of and flight from native language instruction. We also learned about a clearly defined focus on the Swedish language, about which the boys usually had a positive outlook. In addition, we realized that the boys had a clear understanding of the fact of unequal schools and the absence of inclusion. But none of this has any decisive influence on the boys' ways of handling school as a means to achieving the ends that matter to them, at least not during their first period of time in Sweden. Because when the boys' *should* does not completely correspond to the *being* they desire, they themselves mobilize the *doing* needed to maintain their school success. This is what research on resilience as a dynamic element tends to focus on so strongly. Namely, in Rutter's (2013: 34) words, "the relative resistance" that which individuals are able to mobilize, despite adversities, in order to enable a "relatively good outcome", and to become, in Ni Ragahalaigh's and Gillian's (2010: 22) words, *active survivors* rather than *passive victims*. "I'm at school as if nothing had happened, as if I didn't have any problems", Jamal says, continuing, "As if things weren't pretty messy. And then I have no problems because I like studying." We thus learn that more is required of the individual's *resilience of doing* when the opportunity structure is weak. We have, then, a third form of resilience, namely the *resilience of concrete doing* that can be mobilized when the individual's *should* is still strong, but – as in this case – his *being* is weak.

Naturally, in the best of all possible worlds, all three forms of resilience interact – namely when the "encapsulated resilience of normative longing" is confirmed by the "opportunity structure's realized resilience" such that the "resilience of concrete doing" is doubly scaffolded. This is when the boys get real access to what they long for and are thus supported in what they want to do. But we have learned as well that the resilience of agency may survive, even intensify, if the first form is intact when the second form gives way. This is particularly true when, despite shortcomings, the opportunity structure as a whole is experienced as having a relatively strong presence. On the other hand, it would have been better if all teachers had fulfilled the boys' expectations, if multilingual classrooms assistants

had been in place and if native language instruction and translanguaging had interacted powerfully with Swedish language instruction and all other subjects. Consequently, only two of the cognitive dimension's elementary forms are highly supportive in the boys' schooling: Swedish language instruction and subject-specific teaching in Swedish.

The cognitive scaffolding offered to them is thus insufficient. At the same time, these shortcomings are compensated for by the fact that the non-cognitive dimension's elementary forms are present to a greater extent, particularly with regard to the supportive teachers' expectations, commitment and social relationships, but also, to a lesser extent, concerning identity negotiations and challenges to power relations. The relatively strong, non-cognitive dimension thus compensates for the lacking cognitive dimension. The most challenging factor is obviously the boys' experiences of the absence of equal school settings, where they are kept separate from other students – at the school and/or classroom level – on the basis of *ethnifying* categorizations, which of course make negotiating identity and challenging power difficult. However, this also applies to their Swedish language development.

Nevertheless, despite the clear shortcomings in opportunity structures, we have made visible *the vital centre of enacted resilience*, that is, the meaning system that enables the boys to continue even when the opportunity structure, with respect to several elementary forms, must be judged as either absent or markedly weak. That this is the case should be understood in light of the fact that the boys' vital centre of longing is still intact and that they, in spite of everything, experience the supportive meaning structure as robust enough to maintain their strong longing. In other words, the resilience of agency is able to deal with the gap between longing and opportunity structure. The strongest of resiliencies is thus not only individual but also cognitive, social and cultural, where *should*, *being* and *doing* are united. The key that cannot be lost is common to us all.

Notes

1. In 2011 and 2012, there were 2657 and 3 578 unaccompanied children coming to Sweden, respectively. Among them 1693 and 1940 were from Afghanistan, respectively. In 2015, it was *in total* 35369, the highest level in Sweden ever, out of which 23480 were from Afghanistan (*The Swedish Migration Agency* 2017).

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