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Facilitating agency in Norwegian pupils struggling to stay in school—An alternative approach to emancipatory education

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In this article we discuss a Norwegian alternative educational program which aids pupils struggling to stay in school. The practice displays an unconventional but promising approach to emancipatory education by facilitating agency in struggling pupils. We begin by providing some context on the Norwegian educational system and the Nordic model of education. Thereafter, we clarify our perception of educational equality and its underlying conditions. We then apply the chordal triad of agency as a heuristic framework for the qualitative analysis of our data material, consisting of three individual interviews, a focus group interview (N=6) and a guided tour at the location of the educational practice. The gathered testimonies suggest great potential in the program's ability at facilitating agency in at-risk pupils aged 9–16, thereby reducing chances of school dropout and social exclusion. Based on respondents' reflections, we conclude with some discussion comparing the studied practice to the formal Norwegian education system and its shortcomings in accommodating for certain pupil groups struggling to adapt to traditional schooling.

KEYWORDS

agency, life course, transitions, dropout, early school leaving, non-formal activities

1 Introduction

Norway along with the other Nordic countries, are repeatedly used as an ideal example of an inclusive school system (e.g. Frønes et al., 2020). The Nordic welfare state model provides free education for all, free parental leave, and comprehensive sickness benefits. Norway has topped the UN Human Development Index (HDI) for several years and is currently standing at second in the world (UNDP, 2022). The right to adapted education is outlined in the very first chapter of the Norwegian education act: “The training must be adapted to the abilities and prerequisites of the individual pupil, apprentice, practical certificate candidate and apprentice candidate” (Education Act, 1998, p. 1–3). This would suggest that the Norwegian education system is suitably equipped to accommodate for all pupils, regardless of their physical/cognitive abilities, as well as economic, social, and cultural status (ESCS).

However, even in an inclusive education system we find exclusion. There is a considerable portion of Norwegian pupils who struggle to follow the ordinary curriculum and regularly skip school as a result. Norwegian pupils' motivation has been measured to be in steady decline from 5th grade up until 10th grade (Wendelborg et al., 2020) and there is an increasing number of pupils who finish compulsory education (up until lower secondary

school, ages 15/16) with zero points in all marks, leading to reduced completion rates in upper secondary school (ages 16–19) (Vika, 2021). Currently the completion rates within five years stand at 70.0% for vocational programs and 80.4% for the pupil population in general (Statistics Norway, 2022).

The mechanisms behind dropout and early school leaving in Norwegian schools are not fully understood. However, like in other international studies (e.g., Iannelli, 2002; Eurostat, 2023) it is empirically demonstrated that Norwegian pupils' prospects of completing school is closely connected to their social background, gender, motivation, grades, and level of parents' education (Markussen, 2010; Knudsen, 2021; Statistics Norway, 2022). It is also known that dropping out of school is closely correlated with youth unemployment (Lamb and Markussen, 2010) and that even an increased intention to drop out of school is significantly associated with youth depression (Sætre et al., 2023). In short, even in the context of the inclusive Norwegian education system, the welfare state and a rather "universalistic transition regime" in international comparison (Walther, 2006), education in Norway is a central factor that determines events in the later course of life, while also being influenced by unequal socioeconomic and cultural relations which it reproduces with respect to the further life course.

In order to reduce early school leaving and to provide a more inclusive education system, both the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research [Meld St. 6, 2019-2020] and legal regulations for the Norwegian teacher education (Ministry of Education and Research, 2016a,b) highlight the educational institutions' role in strengthening the bonds between the different education levels in the educational trajectory. In Norway, there is a lack of any explicit policy directives or research addressing educational transitions, especially between primary and secondary school (Maugesten and Spernes, 2022; Strand, 2022, p. 18), despite a growing body on transitional research internationally (van Rens et al., 2018; Jindal-Snape et al., 2020).

Educational transitions can be understood as a relationship between structural conditions and subjective experiences (Walther, 2006). Recognizing the importance of the life course in the development of agency (Biesta and Tedder, 2007) we acknowledge that educational transitions serve as crucial turning points in understanding life trajectories. This involves not only recognizing the impact of formal settings but also expanding our perspective on educational trajectories to include practices beyond the mainstream, such as informal, non-formal, and alternative forms of education (McGregor et al., 2019). Uncovering, exploring and understanding the emancipatory substance of non-formal educational practice is therefore indispensable for detecting the mechanisms that perpetuate or counteract educational inequality (Klafki, 1999; cf. Freire, 2009; Skarpenes, 2014). By emancipatory education, we refer to educational practice that fosters participation, self-determination and solidarity in education and in life outside educational institutions (Klafki, 1999). Here, education's emancipatory potential lies in transgressing existing practices that create social inequality, e.g., by resisting them and/or becoming aware of the contradictory elements of one's own practice and anticipating an alternative practice (Freire, 2009; Skarpenes, 2014; Jobst, 2023).

Exactly at this intersection, the following article makes its contribution by investigating an alternative pedagogical practice called TAM (Trygghet, Ansvar, Mestring; English: Safety, Responsibility, Mastery)—a long-established alternative education option for *disengaged pupils* (cf. Putwain et al., 2016) in Norwegian primary and lower secondary education (*barneskole* and *ungdomsskole*) struggling to stay in school. We specifically look at the practice case through the lens of agency and early life course transitions, whereby the following two questions are central: (1) What characterizes TAM's methods of designing educational contexts that promote agency? And (2) What can the formal (Norwegian) school system learn from the practice of this alternative educational program?

2 Agency and social reproduction in education from a life course perspective

We begin our theoretical reflection by pointing to studies that emphasize the socially reproductive impact of institutionalized education. From a critical perspective, these studies problematize the relationship between education, society and agency from a range of different perspectives: they point to the ideological content of teaching (e.g., Wexler, 1981; Apple, 1999), to the one-sided orientation of school education toward the requirements of the labor market (Altwater and Huisken, 1971; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Baethge, 1995; Tillmann, 2004, p. 169ff) or to hidden educational processes that lead to the (re)production of symbolic violence and hegemony, as well as to the disciplining and self-exclusion of pupils (e.g., Bourdieu and Passeron, 1971; Gramsci, 1991; Foucault, 1994; Bourdieu, 2001; Freire, 2009; Skrobánek and Jobst, 2010; Bochmann et al., 2017). In short, all these studies indicate that (formal) education is a key social category for legitimizing and reproducing social inequalities and the associated processes of alienation—the opposite of agency, one might say.

The sustained significance and complexity of such a reproductive education for each individual and their social contexts becomes particularly clear from a life course perspective. Here, we understand the life course as a series of events and activities spanning from birth to death. This entails integrating individual lives into social structures, especially focusing on the roles and social positions that exist within institutional orders, different stages of life and the transitions between them (Mayer, 2003). Kagan (1992) distinguishes between *horizontal transitions*—the spatial movement between school, home and extra-curricular activities, and *vertical transitions*—the temporal movement from one educational stage to the next. One can say that the education system is an important part of modern society in regulating the life course and its critical transitions. And we have to add, with reference to the critical education studies mentioned above, that education systems also contribute to reproducing social inequalities in society and thus in everyone's life course.

At the same time, achievement at school and the educational certificates achieved, which influence the further course of life, can only partially be attributed to individual effort or even talent, as opposed to the class-specific distribution of cultural capital. In

fact, the acquisition of the required learning at school presupposes the instruments of acquisition—for example, a certain linguistic mode of expression (cf. Bernstein, 1971). With this consideration, Bourdieu and Passeron (1971), among others, unmasked the principle of formal equality as the real mechanism for reproducing social inequality, and 30 years later it can still be stated: “The formal equality that determines pedagogical practice in fact serves as a disguise and justification for indifference to real inequality in relation to teaching and the culture imparted or, more precisely, demanded in teaching” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 39).

Further, education cannot be reduced to schooling, i.e., institutionalized education or in Bourdieu’s words, institutionalized *cultural capital* such as school certificates. Cultural capital also refers to “incorporated cultural capital” as “a possession that has become a permanent part of the *person*, the *habitus*” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 114). Hence, the *habitus* of a person operates as cultural capital. Furthermore, cultural capital cannot be reduced to “high cultural capital” or formal education. Instead, attention is focused on the “value” of alternative capitals or cultures—capital that is not acknowledged in school (e.g., Thornton, 1996; Jancovich, 2002; Skrobaneck and Jobst, 2006, 2010).

In short, education in a life course perspective must be seen as both institutionalized and incorporated cultural capital/*habitus*. In this sense education is both a source of social reproduction and a resource for productively shaping one’s own life and developing life perspectives. In this paper the complex interrelation between the productive and reproductive elements of education in the life course is inextricably linked to the concept of agency.

A common interpretation of agency is the ability to act independently of societal structures, and thus (gradually) becoming the major factor to directing one’s own life course trajectory. In this regard, agency is not something to be possessed, but rather achieved, through continuous, active engagement with the environment—eventually leading to configurations of existing patterns of routine, purpose and judgement, an interpretation of which Biesta and Tedder (2007) deem as an ecological understanding of agency. The importance of the context in achieving agency is underlined by transition research. Cuconato and Walther (2015) for example highlight the importance of *significant others*—support personnel who acknowledge and guide pupils in their educational decision-making. Tilson and Simonsen (2013) have devised some criteria for skills that are essential for significant others working with children going through critical life course transitions, these are: (1) principle-based optimism, (2) cultural competence, (3) business-oriented professionalism and (4) understanding of networking—all of which are cornerstones in the alternative educational program presented in this paper.

The importance of time in achieving agency is worked out by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) in their paper “What is agency?”. Here they have expanded upon the elements of routine, purpose, and judgement by applying a temporal dimension onto the different elements. They consequently reinstate the constitutive elements of agency as iteration, projectivity and practical evaluation. *Iteration* refers to the selective reactivation and repetition of past patterns of thought and action by individuals in their daily activities, which provides stability and order to social interactions and institutions over time. This repetition helps to sustain identities

and allows individuals to navigate social situations with a degree of predictability. *Projectivity* refers to the ability of individuals to imagine and generate possible future trajectories of action, based on their hopes, fears, and desires. In this process, individuals creatively reconfigure existing structures of thought and action to fit their envisioned future scenarios. *Practical evaluation* refers to the capacity of individuals to make practical and normative judgements about alternative trajectories of action in response to emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of their present situation. This involves weighing the pros and cons of different courses of action and making decisions based on practical considerations and normative values. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) state that these elements ring together like a *chordal triad of agency*. These constitutive elements each have their own association with the past, present and future and the harmonization among them may change over time (Skrobaneck and Vysotskaya, 2022). Later we present some examples on how the studied practice appears to accommodate for agency in pupils struggling to stay in school, using this chordal triad as a framework.

3 Methodology and description of practice

3.1 Methodology

We understand our study as ethnographically inspired practice research following a qualitative case study design (e.g., Atkinson et al., 2001; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2017). Our examination follows the practice-theoretical assumption that (pedagogical) practice has its own inherent logic which differs from the logic of other fields of practice—such as politics or science—and gives practice a relative autonomy (cf. Bourdieu, 1990). This means that the actors in, and with their practice make an independent contribution to education, which intends to go beyond the practices, pedagogical principles, mechanisms, ideas, or time sequences that are assumed to be “normal” within the education system. The data material stems from 3 semi-structured *individual interviews* with 12 predetermined open-ended questions – 2 with practitioners from the educational practice (21.02.22, 27.09.22) and 1 with the headmaster at a local school (30.09.22); 1 *guided tour* at the educational practice documented through photography/Dicptahone, and finally, 1 *focus group interview* (N=6) including TAM practitioners, a headmaster from a local school, municipal support services, a representative from the pedagogical psychological counseling service, and a school department head—all working closely with the practice for several years. A strength to relying on this diverse data material is the possibility to rigorously cover various perspectives on life course transitions, education, and inequality, from involved stakeholders in different social and professional contexts. The specific statements referenced in this article mostly belong to the TAM practitioners, but the findings and discussion segments are informed by testimonies from both politicians, municipal workers and pedagogic personnel working with the practice. In this particular case study, we have not interviewed any children or former beneficiaries, as the primary point of interest was

the stakeholders' room for maneuver, didactical methods, and pedagogical philosophy.

The data material has been transcribed back-to-back and subsequently translated into English. Hesitation phenomena have been kept in the transcription but removed when referred to in this paper. Some words have also been added or removed for clarification; these are put in square brackets. Names of interviewees, pupils and places have been anonymized, and the data material has been cleared of all identifying characteristics, bar the name and location of the practice. Transcriptions were uploaded to Nvivo, where the data material was coded with respect to the vertical and horizontal transitions pertaining to the pupils at TAM, which include: (1) The initial vertical transition into the alternative educational program, (2) The weekly ongoing horizontal transitions between TAM and ordinary school, and (3) The final vertical transition out of TAM and into upper secondary education. Life course transitions, especially vertical ones, can often lead to life altering events in a pupil's life. As pupils approach adulthood, their choices may increasingly affect their later life course, psychosocial development, and occupational options. The observations in this data material reflect this, thus allowing for a discussion of how the educational life course might relate to agency.

3.2 Description of practice

TAM is a Norwegian alternative educational program which supports upper primary and lower secondary pupils, struggling to stay in school (NJFF (Norges Jeger- og Fiskerforbund) [The Norwegian Association of Hunters and Anglers], n.d.; TAM, n.d.). This includes children of various behavioral difficulties, school reluctance, anxiety, mental health issues, neurodevelopmental conditions and pupils having been associated with illicit activities (Individual interviews, 21.02.22, 27.09.22). Once a week, these pupils are voluntarily brought out of school to conduct non-formal outdoor activities—including fishing, cooking, boating and beach clean-ups. TAM's facilities are uniquely situated on an island municipality near the city of Bergen where they have access to vehicles, boats, fishing gear, outdoor areas, and a cabin which functions as their base (Guided tour, 27.09.22). While the practice is a local grass roots initiative, similar programs exist elsewhere in Norway. TAM-practitioners have no formal pedagogic training but several years of experience in a variety of informal/non-formal fields, including fishing, boating, outdoor life, and children's sports.

The practice has developed a highly adapted learning environment. Pupils are given specialized learning objectives, based on what may offer them the highest sense of mastery. Pupils may be picked up at home or at school, some are given individual supervision and should any of the children experience a “bad day,” the practitioners may change their schedule and make up more manageable tasks for the pupil in question. Currently the program has three practitioners, each with a capacity of 3–4 pupils per group, permitting 9–12 pupils per day. As some pupils also require individual supervision, the program reaches about 30 pupils per week—“an adult density which the schools are incapable of competing with” (Individual interview, 30.09.22). The participants/parents apply for the program themselves and are

selected by a municipal coordinator based on who will presumably benefit the most. Thereafter, they usually spend one day a week at TAM, with some voluntarily phasing out from the program toward the end of lower secondary.

One of the most notable and successful elements of this program is the practitioners' ability to gain trust, guide and prepare at-risk pupils for potentially difficult life course transitions, in a way which ordinary teachers and other communal child services often cannot. The practice has accumulated more than 25 years of experience working around children with various difficulties. Teachers, parents, pupils, and municipality workers are very satisfied with the efforts of the practice and the resulting transformative process of the participating pupils (Individual interviews, 21.02.22, 27.09.22, 30.09.22). While there have not been any official independent evaluations of the program, it has been continually funded by the municipality since 1998 and recently the chief practitioner was awarded a royal medal of merit for his efforts working with both troubled youth and maritime environmental issues (NRK, 2023).

4 Findings

Now we present some statements made by professionals working with the practice, regarding TAM's attempts to facilitate agency and accommodate for critical life course transitions in pupils struggling to stay in school.

4.1 Iteration of habituated skill sets in a safe environment

The first important transition concerning the practitioners is the initial move from ordinary school (or prolonged truancy) into the alternative educational program. During an individual interview (27.09.22), one of the practitioners explained: “We have had youth- and childcare workers with us, following up the pupils and making sure that the transition from school to TAM goes as smooth as possible.” Later, he moves on to say: “We have joined with pupils for meetings with the Child Welfare Services and with the Children's Psychiatric Evaluation Services as well.” This demonstrates two important features: (1) the practitioners are concerned with the children's transitional experiences already from the get-go and (2) the practitioners at the practice understand the importance of networking with other childcare services congruent with both the second and fourth criteria of skills for significant others.

Regarding the pupils' social, mental, and behavioral background, the practitioners are adamant on not getting to know too much in advance before the pupils start attending the program:

We do not need to know very much about their behavior, but we do need to know if there is something serious—can the pupil hurt themselves, can they hurt us? [...] There is a balance there... If we get to know every detail, then there is something

in your unconsciousness that makes you prejudiced. It is extremely important that you do not get to know everything, only the relevant parts. (Individual interview, 27.09.22)

This suggests that pupils at the program are not pre-defined by their difficulties and are instead given the opportunity to start anew and re-shape their educational trajectory. This sets the grounds for principle-based optimism, another important attribute of significant others (Cuconato and Walther, 2015). The practitioners grant the pupils the opportunity of defining themselves rather than being pre-defined by their past behavior. This is an early, albeit crucial step in the program's effort to increase pupils' self-perception, leading them to develop and refine a sense of control over their own life course trajectory.

The children at TAM are presented with a range of familiar non-formal activities such as fishing, cooking, boating and beach clean-ups, which, according to the practitioners, serves to reactivate the pupils' self-confidence and sense of self-worth. Pupils can use their existing knowledge and skills to quickly learn and perform practical tasks, offering a newfound sense of mastery. This combined with the unprejudiced perspective of the practitioners sets the stage for *iteration*—repeating gratifying activities, toning down the potentially problematic parts of the children's past and highlighting the positive parts, which can be regarded as the initial step of developing agency.

4.2 Projectivity toward a responsible future

"How do you envision your life in 10 years' time, what is it you have planned to study or work with?" These are questions that the practitioners recount asking the pupils at the practice (Individual interview 27.09.22). The phrasing is open-minded but at the same time optimistic with respect to the future of the pupils. Some of these pupils have completely fallen out of the school system, yet here they are implicitly encouraged to predict themselves as active agents—either working or studying. Another story which came up during this interview (27.09.22) was an anecdote about a previous pupil, currently working as a fisher, visiting the program to deliver some seafood. One of the current pupils asked the fisher what his annual earnings were, which he promptly revealed to be north of a million kroner (about 100.000 euro). This first-hand experience, showing that one can well economically secure one's life through practical work such as fishing, appeared to have a motivating impact on the children. These two examples can be recognized as ways of generating a sense of *projectivity*—providing insight into possible future trajectories of action for the pupils.

4.3 Practical evaluation affirming a sense of mastery

When the pupils—in stark contrast to their unfavorable school experiences—have reinitiated beneficial routines (*iteration*) and recognized the ability to imagine a meaningful future for themselves (*projectivity*), the pupils are urged to reflect on their development, embrace their renewed identities and direct

themselves toward their desired life course trajectory, usually into a vocational education track of their choosing (practical evaluation). In the same interview, the practitioner also gave this example of a typical interaction with a pupil:

Tomorrow, when you are back at school, what is important then? You usually leave your classroom and wander the hallways. Can you promise me, tomorrow, that you will stay seated and not go about and wander? If you need to take a walk, then talk with your teacher and establish a good dialogue instead of just taking off. (Individual interview, 27.09.22)

He further explains that these kinds of interactions usually happen during lunchtime or in a car ride, when one has the pupils' undivided attention. The practitioners use trust they have established with the pupils to set expectations and provide them with advice for returning to their ordinary school, where they still spend most (3–4 days) of their school week. This is also a way of practicing the weekly transition between school and the alternative educational practice, by alluding to the judgement, or practical evaluation, of the pupils themselves. This is an important life skill which the children may also bring along into their working careers.

Most pupils stay at the program until the end of lower secondary, but some may also choose to resign from the alternative educational program and return to their five-day school week to further prepare for the upcoming transition into upper secondary school (Individual interview, 30.09.22). In that case, the practitioners are supportive of their decision and accommodate for the transition to go as smooth as possible—serving as another example of mastery attained through practical evaluation.

Overall, these statements make it clear how *iteration*, *projectivity* and practical evaluation can occur in the context of emancipatory educational spaces. The program's focus on the individual, their personal experiences, growth, and achievements, facilitates agency and fosters pupils' chances of reaching an economic and sociocultural outcome in later life, more equal to that of the remainder of the pupil population, which is also central to what the practitioners at TAM are trying to accomplish.

5 Discussion, practical implications, and future applications

In the introduction, we posed two research questions pertaining to this practice: (1) What characterizes TAM when it comes to designing educational contexts that promote agency? And (2) What can the regular school system learn from the practice of this alternative educational program? Part of these questions are considered interlinked and will thus be addressed concurrently in this final section.

To answer question one: Our findings illustrate some typical interactions and perspectives maintained by the practitioners at TAM. While there, pupils are voluntarily placed in an environment which values their opinions, skill sets and unique personalities. They accomplish non-formal practical tasks yielding immediate results, minimizing the feeling of failure experienced by a lot of pupils struggling in the traditional Norwegian school system. The non-formal thus acts as a bridge between the formal school

curriculum and the pupils' informal knowledge constructing their own personal lifeworld. TAM's practitioners also highlight their ability to connect with pupils on a personal level, as well as emphasizing the pupils' positive attributes. From here, the life course can enter a new trajectory, steering away from potential paths into declined emancipation and low self-esteem.

The practice demonstrates this through: the reactivation and iteration of practical skills—courtesy of the specialized competence of the practitioners—not commonplace in traditional schools; the high expectations paired with the principle-based optimism of the practitioners—aiding the pupils in their projectivity toward imagining a meaningful life and a satisfying career; and finally, the encouragement of pupils to make their own judgement through practical evaluation. Collectively, this amounts to what Emirbayer and Mische (1998) refer to as the chordal triad of agency, what Biesta and Tedder (2007) refer to as an ecological understanding of agency, and furthermore what Tilson and Simonsen (2013) deem as criteria for significant others working with pupils going through difficult life course transitions.

TAM provides the necessary conditions for both iteration, projectivity and practical evaluation. Pupils who may feel misrecognized by the formal education system discover new, practical, and useful ways of applying their skill sets. Some also bring these skill sets, i.e., fishing, boating and biological/ecological competence, into their working careers. Thus, in the case of TAM, the concept of agency connects to both past, present, and future. This is also reflected in the name of the practice—Safety, Responsibility, Mastery—which conveniently correspond to the dimensions of iteration, projectivity and practical evaluation respectively. Features of TAM like reduced class size, positive reinforcement and adult mentors giving explicit social instructions have also been endorsed by several scholars (Tobin and Sprague, 1999; McGee and Lin, 2017).

As for question two: iteration and projectivity need to be properly integrated into the regular school system. Practical evaluation is already well maintained in the Norwegian traditional classroom setting, but in the case of pupils struggling to stay in school, this is not effective as long as they only manage to reflect on their past and present failures. Referring back to critical theory on education, the importance of the acknowledgment of children's cultural capital/habitus can be drawn in different directions. For one, the traditional school system relies heavily on pupils to follow the strict unidirectional framework of school transitioning. Pupils deviating from this framework disturb the natural order and are generally considered a problem (e.g., Cuconato and Walther, 2015). It can be assumed that this unidirectional framework of school transitioning and the connected institutionalized formal education/cultural capital falters where too many children lack the required cultural capital that can be accumulated in school (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 44f). This can, in turn, lead to a transformation of the symbolic power of state-legitimized education. In the interest of maintaining the institution of school and their own professional field of practice, teachers are increasingly confronted with the challenge of acting in a way that is appropriate for the situation and the individual case of the pupils, i.e. recognizing the specific cultural capital of their pupils and integrating it into their practice. We argue that this institutional challenge requires

mediating by educational actors, like e.g., TAM. In this particular case, pupils typically spend 1 day a week at TAM, and the remaining 4 days back in ordinary school. This repeated horizontal transition between formal and non-formal learning environments can be regarded as a form of iteration and practical evaluation in itself—thus the practitioners at TAM are facilitating agency by challenging the unidirectional transitional mechanisms of the formal education system.

Such mediating actors also make a practical contribution to the school's mission of “education and all-round development (Bildung)” (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training and Ministry of Education and Research, 2017), which according to Fauskevåg (2022) is too vaguely defined and difficult to achieve through the competence-oriented framework of the Norwegian core curriculum. TAM recognizes that both Bildung and agency building occurs in relation to daily activities, to what has actually been experienced, and to the needs, interests and necessities of individuals in the context of their social, cultural, economic, and also nature-based embedding (Jobst, 2023).

Emancipatory practices like TAM have a long pedagogical tradition. Hence, TAM as a concrete situated pedagogical practice can be connected to established educational concepts, such as Engeström's “expansive learning” as “learning what is not there yet” (Engeström and Glăveanu, 2012, p. 516), Klafki's concept of Allgemeinbildung with the three basic elements of self-determination, responsibility, and solidarity (Klafki, 1999), or Makarenko's collective education based on pedagogical principles of self-government and collective responsibility (Makarenko, 1975; Yurevich, 2018). Still, the availability of such practices remains sporadic, varying between municipalities, rather than being universally available to pupils who face difficulties staying in school for various reasons.

In the present educational landscape, TAM and similar initiatives may not be feasible in all parts of the traditional Norwegian unified school as they may require a significant degree of inequality of treatment, highly specialized practical competence and a teacher-pupil ratio which is difficult to uphold. Simultaneously, neoliberal reforms are setting in motion trends which further reinforce the reproductive traits of education (e.g., Skarpenes, 2014). We contend that traditional schooling needs to better accommodate for mastery and a sense of achievement, especially for pupils who struggle to stay in school, who need to experience the sensation of agency and being in control of their own life course trajectory. This adds up to the importance of examining current educational alternatives that not only propose a different understanding of education but demonstrate a different approach to education altogether.

6 Acknowledgment of methodological constraints

As our overarching methodology is based on the analysis of one case, generalizable conclusions can only be drawn with caution. However, our results can provide a useful starting point for further analyses. This refers above all to a comprehensive external and internal evaluation of TAM. Such an evaluation should also include

the voice of the children and young adults involved, for example, to gain insight into the perspectives and experiences of current and former participants in TAM's practice. And last but not least, more studies like this seem necessary to create a real-life inclusive school system that combats educational inequality and universally enables mastery and emancipation.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Norwegian Center for Research Data. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

IT: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing. SJ: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing –

review and editing. ED: Data curation, Investigation, Writing – review and editing. MK: Data curation, Investigation, Writing – review and editing. JS: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Writing – review and editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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