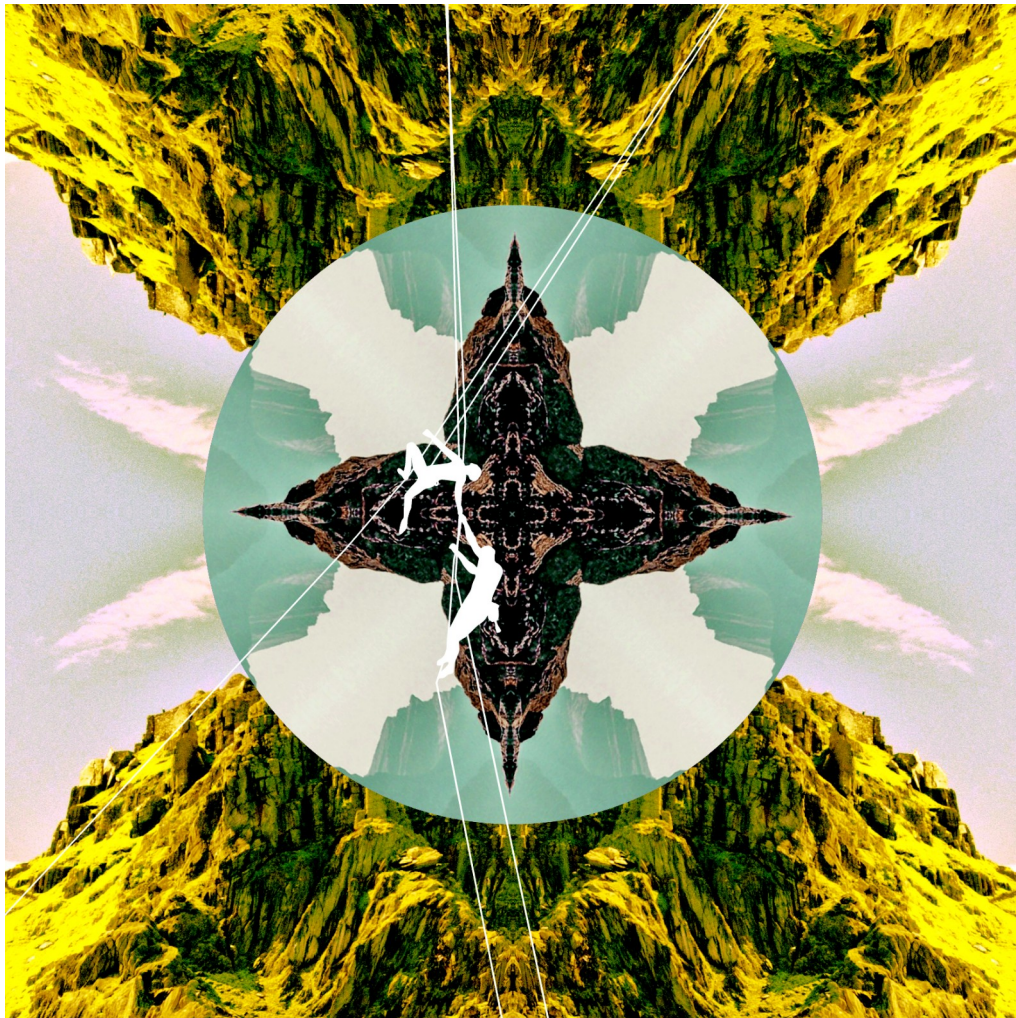


Guro Hansen Helskog, Ingrid R. Christensen,  
and Åsmund Aamaas (Eds.)

# Reflective Practice Research in International Collaboration



**Reflective Practice Research**

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**LIT**

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in International Collaboration**

# Reflective Practice Research

Edited by

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Michael Noah Weiss  
(University of South-East Norway)

and

Prof. Guro Hansen Helskog  
(University of South-East Norway)

Volume 4

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LIT

# Reflective Practice Research in International Collaboration

Developing Teacher Education in Togetherness

Edited by

Guro Hansen Helskog  
Ingrid R. Christensen  
Åsmund Aamaas

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# FOREWORD

Petter Aasen<sup>1</sup>

International collaboration is institutionalised as an integral part of all aspects of academic activities. Universities have developed institutional strategies and implemented actions to increase outbound and inbound mobility of students, doctoral candidates, and postdoctoral researchers; strengthen research and educational collaboration with foreign higher education institutions; widen engagement in community development and capacity building in the global south and in war-torn countries; obtain international funding; and participate in international university alliances and networks. The engagement by university employees in international cooperation is significant.

The background for increasingly stronger institutionalization of international collaboration is the recognition that it is a prerequisite for quality enhancement in education and research activities. The emphasis is also related to increased globalisation. It is a growing recognition that advances in knowledge that ensure sustainable social, cultural, and economic development transcend national borders.

Internationalization activities are undoubtedly academically rewarding. At the same time, international research and educational collaboration can also be institutionally and personally demanding. In international collaboration, different political framework conditions, societal structures, cultural traditions, ways of thinking, and interpretive contexts meet. This setting provides both premises for international collaboration and influences collaborative relationships and the understanding of different situations at both institutional and project levels. As a university leader, I have experienced the importance of spaces for critical reflection related to both the facilitation of practical collaboration and the practical outcomes of the collaboration.

This book, edited by three colleagues at the University of South-Eastern Norway, reflects on and discusses experiences gained by internationally engaged employees at the university and their partners at international collaborating institutions.



Special attention is paid to the participants' experiences from three international cooperation projects involving the University of South-Eastern Norway and universities in Ukraine, Palestine, and India. Through a reflective approach anchored in various theoretical perspectives, the book discusses and sheds light on key experiences in international academic cooperation.

The book reminds us that an important and crucial part of the internationalization of higher education and research is to provide spaces for critical reflection and discussion of the experiences that different participants encounter. As the chapters in this book show, this can open new perspectives and insights. In recent years, increased international polarization and the emergence of social trends that reflect a disregard for documented knowledge and for reliable methods of establishing knowledge have made international collaboration even more crucial. Liberal democracies are under pressure. Traditional sources of authority, including scientific and academic institutions, face scepticism. More than ever before, we experience that pursuing academic values through international cooperation requires a critical, reflective competence as well as compassionate attitudes among participants. This book is an important contribution in this regard.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Petter Aasen is a full professor in pedagogy and was the rector/president of the University of South-Eastern Norway in the period 2007–2023. From 1998 to 2007, he was director of the Nordic Institute for Studies of Innovation, Research and Education (NIFU).

# CHAPTER 1: DEVELOPING EDUCATION THROUGH INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION – A PROLOGUE

Guro Hansen Helskog<sup>1</sup>, Ingrid Reite Christensen<sup>2</sup> and Åsmund Aamaas<sup>3</sup>

At the heart of this anthology lies a commitment to developing teacher education in togetherness, an ethos of relational, reflective, and ethically grounded international collaboration. The golden thread running through our chapters is the movement beyond instrumental, policy-driven internationalization efforts toward deeply human, dialogical, and wonder-based collaboration.

The cultural-historical context of our work is the general internationalisation policies in higher education. Academia has a long history of being international, for instance, in the form of international conferences and research collaboration. However, it is a relatively recent development that internationalization of higher education has become an aim of its own, rather than a consequence of ongoing academic activity (Flobakk-Sitter and Hybertsen, 2021). The internationalization efforts that this anthology is born out of are a result of the rather new policy priorities regarding internationalization of higher education. The policy context can be traced at least two decades and be seen as part of European efforts to adapt to what has long been understood as an increasingly globalized world.

## Policy context

Globalization is often understood as the politics and practice of promoting interconnectedness and interdependence among people and countries across the world, manifesting, amongst others, in increased cultural exchange and the spread of technology (see, i.e., Held and McGrew, 2002). An aspect of globalization has been internationalization in education, which originally referred to cross-border interactions and connections, especially in the field of higher education, involving activities such as faculty and stu-

dent exchange, joint research projects, and international collaboration in curriculum development (Finardi & Rojo, 2015).

While Norwegian internationalization policy for a long time primarily focused on collaboration and interaction within the European context (Trondal et al., 2001), the so-called “Quality Reform”, following the endorsement of the Bologna Declaration of a common European space of higher education, was fully implemented from January 2004. The Quality Reform implied a greater national standardization of internationalization, as earlier internationalization efforts had been characterized by a relative absence of central regulation (Tjomsland, 2004). Both the Bologna Declaration and the Quality Reform were political means to expose Norwegian students, teachers, and researchers to higher education in Europe. In 2009, however, the Norwegian government presented a report to the parliament stating that education for everyone is important and that “internationalization of education is something that concerns all pupils and students, training and teaching staff, and academic, administrative and technical personnel” (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2008–2009:4). The purposes of the internationalization efforts were to increase people’s ability to meet the challenges and opportunities that arise from globalization and international interaction in working life and in society. This included bettering language skills and understanding of and insight into other cultures and broadening the geographical perspective, for example, in the direction of “new economies”, as it is stated (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2008–2009). Following up on these priorities, the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research was given as one of its tasks to strengthening international collaboration. Government programmes supporting partnerships with prioritized non-European countries (Panorama strategy) and other third countries (HK-dir NORPART) were included in the internationalization policy (Mld. St. 7. (2020–2021, pp. 25–30).

In this globalization scenario, the internationalization of higher education is increasingly seen as a key feature of “global universities”, Haley et al. (2022, p. 1) state. Students and researchers are now expected to have a broad understanding of different cultures, languages, and worldviews. Internationalization in education can thus take the form of exposure to different cultures and ways of thinking, which can broaden people’s perspectives and foster intercultural and interreligious understanding. It can also enhance learning outcomes for students through the exchange of teaching approaches from different contexts. Moreover, it can lead to enhanced research and innovation, as international collaboration might result in the de-

velopment of new insights and discoveries that can benefit the respective societies.

## **Collaboration efforts in an increasingly polarized world**

Parallel to globalization tendencies and internationalization efforts in the last decades, we have seen an increasing polarization at different levels of the global community, ranging from the global to the local and inter-personal. Polarization can here be understood as the phenomenon of increasing divides between groups of individuals who do not share the same beliefs, values, or worldviews. Part of this scenario are increasingly anti-democratic, authoritarian, national-protective, and national-expansive forces that are taking hold of the world. For instance, in this concrete anthology, some of the authors are directly affected by the wars between Russia and Ukraine (Beskorsa 2025, Lukianchenko 2025) and in Palestine (Christensen, Wistrøm, and Adwan 2025). The collaboration started before the wars and has continued despite them. Needless to say, it is probable that continuing the projects on democracy education when there is a war against democracy going on has been close to impossible. Yet, as manifested in these essays, the collaboration and relations that were established in times of peace have continued to nurture the private and professional lives of involved teacher educators. With regard to this, many of the essays illustrate alternatives to polarization, showing how compassionate relationships across cultural and religious worldviews might increase the focus on our shared humanity and our shared human condition.

Establishing close, personal relationships between project members is listed by Duesund and Aasland (2023) as a key factor determining success in international collaboration. Other important factors mentioned by them that are of importance to the work with and content of this anthology, as well, respectively:

1. the willingness and ability of project partners to include others in the work, pass the baton to a new generation of coordinators, and share their experience, insight, and knowledge developed through international projects with others, as the authors do with this anthology;
2. the “bottom-up” initiatives, efforts, and dedication of individuals, with solid anchoring in the respective institutions on both sides of the partnership, as several of our essays are indicators of;

3. the ability to understand the meaning and role of cultural differences, as some of the authors explore and reflect explicitly upon;
4. the ability to engage longitudinally in the work, as international collaboration is more like a marathon than a sprint. The work with this anthology has in itself been a collaborative marathon.

### **Reflective practice research in international collaboration**

The factors listed above may offer open and unknown spaces for concrete, critical, and theoretical reflection on the role of internationalization in education. We acknowledge that cross-border relationships and connections do not only appear as matters of technical exchanges of knowledge and skills, but also propel transformation and questions concerning ethical, existential, relational, and even spiritual meaning. Such themes are not easily researched through traditional empirical research methods oriented towards objectivity, as Hansen (2025) argues in Chapter 2. Here, phenomenological and hermeneutical approaches are better suited. Such research approaches link to premodern academic traditions. As Lindseth (2023) argues, Before modernity, both philosophy and research were oriented towards understanding the *meaning* of being in relation to phenomena of life. However, from the beginning of modernity onwards, science has mainly been directed toward the outer, factual, and objective world. While this change has led to impressive technological development, our ability to find meaning and *orientation* in life seems to have decreased. “We might say that we know more and understand less”, he argues. Thus, as a reaction to science that gives us knowledge more than understanding, philosophical hermeneutics came about in the middle of the 19th century, and phenomenology started as a movement at the beginning of the 20th century. Like philosophical hermeneutics, phenomenology emphasized the necessity of understanding life on the basis of our acquaintance with lifeworld phenomena, our *preunderstanding*.

When we sit down in solitude or in a small group of peers to write a reflective practice research essay, we begin the process by narrating a personal experience, inviting first ourselves and then later maybe our peers, then finally our readers into our story. Through the narration, we start the shift from a natural attitude of taking meaning for granted to a phenomenological attitude where we pause our judgements. In Lindseth’s (2023) words: “The natural attitude is an attitude in which we judge, we know already, we

conclude, we state the facts and take for granted what is meant. To shift to a phenomenological attitude, we must refrain from making judgements about the factual and accomplish epoché or bracketing. The natural way of doing this is to narrate from lived experience. When narrating, we naturally refrain from judging and concluding. ( . . . ) In the telling, both the teller and the listener participate in the narrated meaning. Then they may consider: What are the important themes here?”

This is what all the contributors to this anthology have been invited to do. In different constellations due to the geographical distance between many of us, we have met several times on campus and/or digitally and/or at Guro Hansen Helskog’s farm to discuss possible ways to understand our narratives, read and comment on drafts in smaller groups, and rewrite based on editor comments. As such, the research process has not been a collective journey for all of us.

As suggested in Lindseth (2020), all the authors of this essay begin with a lived experience in the form of original and concrete reflection. We do so by narrating one or more experiences from international collaboration that have been important to us in one way or another, and that we, for some reason, cannot forget because they made such an impression on us. Maybe the experiences puzzled us, made us wonder or question ourselves and our previous practices or ways of being in the world. It can also be an experience of discrepancy, i.e., that something is not quite right in a situation or that things did not go as expected, or that we are left in surprise over something. In this concrete and original reflection part, the experiences are narrated more or less “straight from the heart”, with a hint of the mystery of the experience. It could be one incident, a series of incidents, or an educational process that the author has experienced or facilitated. By refraining from already knowing what our experiences mean until we have taken a closer look at them through the process of reflecting upon them and writing the essays, maybe together with co-authors, we have exercised what Husserl called *epoché* (pause, restraint), leaving the natural attitude and entering a phenomenological attitude. This might seem easy, but this is far from the case, and for some, it has caused quite a bit of confusion and frustration. Turning one’s gaze inwards towards one’s own experience, writing a story from a first-person perspective, and seeking to understand this text of ours, instead of looking outwards at facts in the world, is difficult. As such, what the second author calls the voice of personal being is present in all the essays. Moreover, the personal relationships between the authors and their international partners are, in one way or another, at the centre of

the authors' reflections. Hence, the voice of ethical calling is also present in many of the essays.

The experiences are then discussed, and one or a few themes are guided by a question such as "What is at stake in this narrative?" or "What is the deeper meaning of this experience?" is drawn out (see also Lindseth and Norberg 2021). This is the critical reflection part of the essays. In this phase the authors stay close to the narrated experience in order to see what emerges from it. Here, it might become obvious that our personal experiences are not purely "subjective", and our practices are not simply "my practice". On the contrary, we might discover how our experiences and practices are intertwined in cultural-historical webs or see how our experience contains dilemmas that are embedded in political and institutional structures or how collective historical guilt is lurking under our personal and academic relationships. As such, our personal experiences contain general themes that can be drawn out and studied further through phenomenological and hermeneutic interpretation and reflection. Hence, there is a move from concrete experience towards more general themes and phenomena that can resonate with the experience of others and be of interest and importance to human beings in other contexts.

When reflecting further upon these themes, it is time to draw in perspectives from philosophical, theoretical, and spiritual literature in order to understand the phenomenon more deeply and broadly. Thus, in the last part of the essays, the themes are reflected upon in more general terms, drawing on spiritual and philosophical as well as theoretical perspectives and research literature. This is the theoretical reflection part of the essays. Epistemologically speaking, the aim in these sections can be to reveal aspects of the multifaceted, dynamic, and kaleidoscopic understanding that emerges through the reflective process (see Helskog and Weiss 2023) or also to dive deeper into the mystery of the phenomenon, in line with Chapter 2, Apophatic Epistemology – or the Dao of Reflective Practice Research. In this essay, the author provides a theoretical overview and grounding for the chosen research approach in our book. He asks what kind of research is needed when wanting to approach existential, ethical, and spiritual experiences in practical professions such as nursing and teaching. These experiences are often very delicate and ineffable and accompanied by deep wonder. The chapter questions how far epistemological approaches can reach to grasp such experiences. It is argued that by following the thinking of Gadamer, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein, it is possible to talk about an "Apophatic Epistemology" that, to a certain degree, can make room for the ineffable. Being in deep

wonder seems to be key when approaching the ineffable in Reflective Practice Research. Yet, the author also shows how an apophatic epistemology may have its limits.

The choice of reflective practice research as orientation has allowed for very different ways of structuring the texts. We see this as a strength of the anthology, as the openness has allowed the different voices of the authors to be heard in their own unique ways. Our experiences are different. So are our ways of reflecting upon them.

## **The contributions**

The three internationalization projects represented in this book were funded by Norwegian government institutions and involved collaboration with countries outside the EU. In the following two sections, we will give an overview of the internationalization projects and the respective reflective practice research essays written based on experiences from these projects (chapters 3–10). The projects are, respectively, a) *Developing Democracy Education in Ukraine, Norway, and Palestine*; b) *Quality in Teacher Education – Joining Forces through Internationalisation (JOIN)*; and c) *Teacher Education for Sustainable Futures in India and Norway (TeachIN)*.

### ***Collaboration between Ukraine; Norway and Palestine***

The overall objective of the project, *Developing Democracy Education in Ukraine, Norway, and Palestine*, was to improve democracy teaching in teacher education in Ukraine, Norway, and partly Palestine. The main activities took place in Ukraine in the period 2018–2019, before the Covid-19 pandemic in the period of March 2020 to fall 2021, and the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The objectives have been achieved through student and staff mobility, international comparisons of democracy, research-based curriculum development, and training in teaching. The main partners have been the University of South-Eastern Norway and National Pedagogical Dragomanov University, with sub-partner Sloviansk State Pedagogical Institute in Ukraine, with assistance from PRIME in Palestine. The project has been led by USN and Øyvind Wistrøm, with Ingrid Christensen as a co-coordinator, while Author Sami Adwan has contributed from Palestine and PRIME.

Communication across cultural, historical, academic, and personal customs and expectations is a general issue in all forms of international collaboration.



oration. This theme is addressed explicitly by Ingrid Reite Christensen in Chapter 3, “*Establishing communication between partners in a democracy education project: The example of the crawling professor*”. Christensen tells the story of two sessions at a seminar in Kyiv, where one followed the conventional rules of academic presentation, while the second did just the opposite. While the author experienced losing the audience’s attention, the next speaker surprised the audience and the author by breaking all the usual communication advice for an academic presentation: shouting, laughing, and even crawling on the floor. Despite the frustrating experience of not communicating, the actual insight seems to be joyful and energetic. Gaining insights into communication and connection comes with a sense of relief over leaving established standards. The insights appear as professional teaching competence, while professionalism does not lie in its structural qualities or the perfection of academic knowledge. Instead, “wonder” touches upon something deep about being a teacher and an academic, whereas the secrets of communication are available in the clashes between cultures, which can be open, creative, and curious spaces free of the shame of failure.

One of the activities in the *Developing Democracy Education in Ukraine, Norway, and Palestine* project was the introduction of philosophical dialogue into teacher education provided in two 3-day Dialogos workshops in 2018–2019, facilitated by Guro Hansen Helskog, based on her book *Philosophising the Dialogos Way towards Wisdom in Education. Between Critical Thinking and Spiritual Contemplation* (Helskog 2019). Two of the contributions, respectively Chapter 4 written by Olena Beskorsa and Chapter 5 written by Olga Lukianchenko, take their point of departure in the profound transformation and release of creativity experienced in the philosophical dialogue workshops, which the authors have later taken into their own contexts and further reflected upon in their essays. In Chapter 4, “*Philosophising together – a way towards safe space*”, Beskorsa describes several incidents and turning points that can be described as moments of insight from professional mastery to mystery. At first, it seems like philosophical dialogue was established as “professional knowledge” and then as a “voice of ethical calling/mystery”. More than the successes or failures, the question about the author’s professional and personal process comes into focus. However, developing a safe space does not emerge in the form of a calm, meditative insight. Rather, her journey towards increased wisdom offers her struggle, not the least in conflicts with students and colleagues about teaching methods, negotiated and tested against other ways

of teaching. The connections and the relations seem to play a critical role. Her journey is not about detaching from the world and turning inwards. Instead, boundary-crossing takes place on several levels in the midst of, and as a result of, messiness, fear, and forceful changes of professional identity, as well as handling war and risks for her and her family. Her moments of wonder are not without pain, as pain seems to prevail over her deeper insights. Philosophising and wisdom appear in her moments of connections at the international seminars on philosophical dialogue with her students and colleagues. Her insights are not only based on her own meetings but also on how others meet with her, both the conflicted and the healing meetings. She reaches out to the students throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, and her international contacts reach out to her.

Further, in Chapter 5, *“Developing Tolerance through Philosophical Dialogue in the Training of Primary School Teachers in Ukraine: A Fruit of International Collaboration”*, author Olha Lukianchenko takes her point of departure in the experience of philosophising according to the Dialogos approach, discussing the role and significance of internationalization in education for improving the means and methods of training future teachers. It suggests that tolerance is a necessary quality of a modern teacher and shows how philosophical dialogues can promote it.

Also, the authors of Chapter 6, *“Becoming rocked: Developing a partnership between universities in Palestine and Norway”*, Ingrid Reite Christensen, Øyvind Wistrøm, and Sami Adwan, describe a strong relationship and partnership as a key factor in international collaboration in the context of a joint 20-year collaboration between higher education institutions in Palestine and Norway, and between themselves as colleagues. The chapter takes a starting point in Wistrøm’s experience during a dialogue meeting between Palestinian and Israeli families in Bethlehem in 1999, telling their stories of the war in 1948 and how they live their lives. The authors recall a specific “moment of truth” through the eyes of Adwan, a Palestinian teacher who describes a tough life under occupation and contrasts it with the life of many Israelis. This statement represented a moment of “being rocked”. The authors then elaborate on this statement, becoming an “imperative realization of facts”. In this moment, the Norwegian partner gets a glimpse of the fatal situation of Palestinians – its deep injustice and hopelessness. Through this experience, the authors do not express that one can fully understand what it is to be a Palestinian. Yet, the authors elaborate on the moment of being moved and of connecting to people, to land, and to history. The realization is not any beautiful moment of wonder and harmony but rather

the opposite: a painful mark of suffering. Wistrøm describes his wisdom as moving beyond the voice of theoretical knowing or the voice of skills. The painful insights at the seminar in Bethlehem make up a driving force for collaboration with Adwan and Palestinian partners. We propose that learning partnerships involve intricate processes of seeking comprehensive insights, resisting simplistic solutions in favour of embracing complexity, and demonstrating openness to acknowledging and addressing suffering.

### *Collaboration between Norway and India*

Savitribai Phule Pune University in India (SPPU) and the University of South-Eastern Norway (USN) have three joint and externally funded projects in the field of teacher education: Quality in Teacher Education – Joining Forces through Internationalisation (JOIN), Teacher Education for Sustainable Futures in India and Norway (TeachIN), and INterGlocal: Connecting Global and Local Realities through Indo-Norwegian Internationalization in Teacher Education. All three projects are funded by the Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills (HK-Dir). JOIN (2017–2024) was funded through the NOTED programme. NOTED was established in 2017 in response to the Norwegian government’s strategy, “Promotion of the status and quality of teachers – joint effort for a modern school of knowledge”, and the introduction of master’s degree programmes in teacher education for primary and lower secondary schools (HK-Dir). TeachIN (2022–2025) and INterGlocal (2025–2028) are funded through the HK-Dir UTFORSK programme. UTFORSK funds educational partnerships in higher education and was initiated in response to the Norwegian Panorama strategy, which identified nine non-European countries as prioritized partner countries, including India.

SPPU and USN have collaborated since 2005 (see Duesund and Aasland, 2023), and this long-standing partnership has encouraged project members to explore shared challenges and possibilities in teacher education through collaborative, dialogical, and comparative approaches. When applying for funding, project partners from SPPU and USN argued that the projects were important for the quality and relevance of their teacher education programmes. Teacher Education 2025, the National Strategy for Quality and Cooperation in Teacher Education (Government of Norway, 2018) in Norway, and the National Education Policy 2020 (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020) in India pointed towards a stronger focus on 1) interdisciplinary cooperation, 2) relevance and quality of research,

and 3) relevance of the study programmes for the profession. The TeachIN application highlighted that JOIN showed that international and interdisciplinary collaboration enhanced and enriched their teacher education programmes through student and staff mobility, including virtual mobility and joint development and research activities. An activity also included in these projects was the introduction of philosophical dialogue in teacher education, provided through two 3-day Dialogos workshops in May and October 2022, respectively, facilitated by Guro Hansen Helskog, based on her book *Philosophising the Dialogos Way towards Wisdom in Education. Between Critical Thinking and Spiritual Contemplation* (Helskog 2019).

Five chapters in this anthology are directly linked to JOIN, TeachIN and INterGlocal. Chapters 7 and 8 address different ways of and reasons for getting involved in and committing to this international collaboration. In Chapter 7, “*International Collaboration and Workplace Friendships*”, authors Åsmund Aamaas and Vaibhav Jadhav take their point of departure in a shared experience at the marketplace in Pune, India, in 2014. They reflect upon how this experience marked the beginning of a workplace friendship, greatly influencing the authors’ joint journey and the future collaboration between the two universities.

In Chapter 8, “*Ways of Understanding Coincidences. Synchronicity, Intuition and Divine Guidance*”, the first author, Guro Hansen Helskog, takes her point of departure in her concrete experiences from trying to help a minor refugee with access to an education and a decent life. In rather coincidental and mysterious ways, educational opportunities opened up for the Kid, and opportunities for longstanding international collaboration opened up for Helskog. Together with colleagues Michael Noah Weiss and Christian Stokke, she has reflected critically and theoretically upon the experiences. Seven chains or patterns of experiences are drawn out in the critical reflection section and reflected theoretically upon from the perspectives of synchronicity, intuition, and divine guidance, without drawing any bold conclusions as to which should be held as the right way of understanding what happened.

In Chapter 9, “*Exploring our Cultural-Historical Embeddedness: Dialogos meets the Indian Gurukul Tradition*”, authors Guro Hansen Helskog and Vaibhav Jadhav take their departure in three small episodes where the European one of us experienced that she did not fully understand what was happening. The experiences included an inauguration ceremony, different forms of teaching, and someone bending down to touch her feet. In an effort to better understand, she invited her Indian colleague to reflect

upon the episodes together with her, using a reflective practice research approach. Through the collaborative reflections that followed, the authors mutually received glimpses into what seemed to be fragments of each other's cultural-historical traditions, namely, the ancient roots of the Indian cultural tradition and the Socratic dialogue tradition, amongst others.

As mentioned, parts of the projects in Ukraine and India were Dialogos philosophical dialogue workshops intended to make participating teacher educators capable of trying out similar exercises with their students. In Chapter 10, *“What does it imply to see a child? On universal dimensions of compassionate teacher-student relationships”*, authors Guro Hansen Helskog, Dipali Mehakarkar, and Chaitali Ghosh Sinha take their point of departure in one of the comparative philosophical dialogues in the workshops in India. Through the methods of comparative philosophical dialogue and written theoretical reflections, the experiences of Indian co-authors Dipali Mehakarkar and Chaitali Ghosh Sinha are first narrated and then explored critically. In the process, the phenomena, respectively, of *seeing* behind the immediate behavior and actions of children by tuning in to their emotional and existential state of being and then taking proper *action*, doing what is right in the situation, are synthesized. In the theoretical reflection section, the concepts of “empathic communication”, “the tolerance window”, “regulation”, and “phronesis” are applied to the phenomena. As a final afterthought, the authors argue that the lives of these children lie in the hands of their teachers. Their *seeing* and acting upon what they saw were life-changing for the children.

With their different perspectives, JOIN and TeachIN-project members were determined to contribute to building a culture of internationalization at the core of the USN and SPPU teacher training programmes. The University of Oulu and the University of Iceland were also affiliated with the JOIN project. USN, Oulu, and Iceland were already working together in the Spica network. Spica is a Nordic<sup>4</sup> network for teacher education institutions supported by the Nordplus programme, focusing on global issues in local contexts (spicanetwork.com). In this way, USN connected different partners in one project. The aim was to ensure that teacher students had access to various international learning arenas during their studies.

In Chapter 11, the authors Audrey Paradis, Jarno Slendebroek, Leandra Ve, Saskia Romen Marianne Reuse, Md Abu Nayeem, Laurel Seppälä, Alina Marchenko, and Elizabeth Harlow discuss how students from Oulu shifted their understanding of inclusive education (IE) during and after participating in an intensive programme organized by the network at SPPU,

India. The chapter discusses how IE has become important for education systems around the world, but what IE entails seems to differ depending on local definitions. The authors explore their changing perceptions of IE in a context new to them and analyse narratives that emerged from the mobility programme, focusing on the experiences that were most impactful to the mobility's participants. The analysis suggests that national policies concerning IE can have varied effects on local educational institutions, often relying on the skills and motivation of local actors when it comes to the implementation in their contextual realities.

In addition to focusing on mobility and lowering the threshold for students and staff to explore new contexts and perspectives, internationalization at home is an integrated approach in JOIN and TeachIN. Intensive courses are examples of that. One main goal is to make internationalization accessible to all students, including those unable to go abroad. A key aspect of this strategy is integrating short- and long-term incoming students into mainstream teacher education programmes. Chapter 11 is an example of this, addressing an intensive course developed by the project partners. The joint JOIN course later became an open course in the teacher education portfolio in Pune, within the frames of the TeachIN project and the Finland-financed Teacher Education for Sustainable Futures (TESF)<sup>5</sup> project.

The TeachIN project was initiated four years after JOIN to expand the existing partnership between SPPU and USN, with a clear focus on ways to implement Agenda 2030 in education, with a particular focus on target 4.7 – Education for sustainable development and global citizenship. As we have seen, Åsmund Aamaas and Vaibhav Jadhav explored the idea of working with global citizenship back in 2014. At that time, they were both junior team members that later became project coordinators. They explored the market together and discussed real-life and educational challenges and possibilities. Discussing global citizenship and sharing professional and personal knowledge and experiences in the marketplace was inspirational and made sense to them. This is not the only example of place-based experiences of importance to the project.

## General internationalization efforts

As we have seen, a majority of the chapters in this book are examples of how participants in the internationalization projects strive to connect the different parts of these projects. Research activities are thus directly linked

to the field of practice within the internationalization projects. The final three chapters of the book, however, take their point of departure in general internationalization activities that are not connected to these projects, but which involve more regular international academic collaboration. For instance, in Chapter 12, *“A Horse Called Hitler: International disturbances and reflections on the German guilt”*, author Kerstin Bornholdt takes her point of departure in an experience from the social part of an international conference where the author, as a German, was given the role of a horse resembling Hitler, entering the conference room with one of the other participants on her back, enacting the role of Mussolini. She reflects upon the incident from the perspective of “inherited collective guilt” and “historical/collective responsibility”. The essay then discusses critically the concept of cosmopolitical identities and the challenges of deconstructing and de-essentialising narratives of national historical identities.

Further, in Chapter 13 *“From Geopolitics to Rare Earths: International Collaboration and the Material Foundations of Global Change”*, author Erlend Bendik Myhre takes his point of departure in the feeling of frustration as a teacher educator in social studies focusing on geopolitics and geo-economics. Narrating the story of how he invited an international expert with practical experience in dealing with so-called rare earth elements (REE), the author problematises how the ambitions regarding the green shift and global warming collide with the geopolitical national security perspective as well as the capitalist growth perspective. The three are different logics with different purposes that do not work well together.

Finally, in Chapter 14, *“The Significance of Existential Encounters in International Collaboration: Gesturing towards epistemological diversity”*, author Kristin Gregers Eriksen takes her departure in a self-altering experience as an international visiting researcher witnessing a First Nations Sundance ceremony in Vancouver, Canada, in 2019. The author discusses her experience in dialogue with indigenous, decolonial, and pluriversality approaches to knowledge. Three main insights derived from her analysis of the experience: epistemic blindness, border thinking, and the significance of acknowledging the ontological level when approaching the challenges of modern/colonial unsustainability. Through the theoretical-philosophical reflection, the author explores the potentials of internationalization in education as an avenue towards the co-creation of new paradigms that may open not-yet-imaginable possibilities for sustainable futures.

## Summing up

Altogether, the 14 chapters of this anthology cover a wide range of themes and questions emerging from concrete and determined internationalization efforts. There is a golden thread running through the anthology, namely the cultivation of wisdom through shared vulnerability and reflective dialogue across borders. The collective insight that can be drawn out of our shared work is that international collaboration in teacher education becomes truly transformative only when it is practiced as reflective, relational, and wonder-based inquiry into what it means to be human – together.

Through a reflective practice research approach, authors have explored key challenges of internationalization projects between the University of South-Eastern Norway and, respectively, universities in Ukraine, Palestine, and India in particular, and in international collaboration in general. The research approach has allowed for a variety of experiences to be contemplated and of theoretical perspectives to be applied, in line with a so-called “kaleidoscopic epistemology” (Helskog and Weiss 2023), as well as Hansen’s (2025 in this anthology) model of the four voices of reflective practice research. A few of the essays also come in touch with the “Dao” of reflective practice research – i.e., with that which cannot be understood in rational language. Across the Ukraine–Norway–Palestine and India–Norway partnerships, the anthology models reflective practice research as both method and mindset that begins in lived experience and dialogue. Through this approach, international collaboration becomes not just a means of exchanging knowledge but a transformative practice of co-being, and a collective search for meaning, democracy, and hope amid global fragmentation and conflict. The anthology reframes research as an ethical encounter rather than as data collection. Starting from lived experience, practitioners narrate, interpret, and theorize their own and others’ experiences in a hermeneutic–phenomenological way. Reflection becomes a site where personal, institutional, and geopolitical layers of meaning intertwine. Through acknowledging our interdependent humanity and our shared vulnerability, we can challenge socio-political forces threatening to dehumanize us and polarize our world.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Guro Hansen Helskog holds a position as full professor of pedagogy at the University of South-Eastern Norway. Amongst others, she developed the Dialogos approach to philosophical practice from 2004 on. She has published several books and research articles



both in Norwegian and English, including *Philosophising the Dialogos Way towards Wisdom in Education. Between Critical Thinking and Spiritual Contemplation* (Routledge 2019) and *Reflective Practice Research in Higher Education Pedagogies* (with Michael N. Weiss, LIT 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Ingrid R. Christensen is a full professor in pedagogy and specializes in professional learning and ethics. Christensen has experience in teaching and supervision across all levels in pedagogy, research methodology, special needs education, and the integration of technology in education. She has led and developed research and development projects in education, including in Palestine and Ukraine. She is currently working on the development of European border collaboration at the Norwegian Police University College.

<sup>3</sup> Åsmund Aamaas is an Associate Professor in Social Studies at the University of South-Eastern Norway. He is particularly interested in aspects related to internationalization in education and research, place-based education, indigenous perspectives in education, and the role of teacher education for sustainable futures.

<sup>4</sup> Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands

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## CHAPTER 2: THE DAO OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE RESEARCH

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### Abstract

This chapter explores Apophatic Epistemology, a reflective research approach grounded in deep contemplative wonder, which challenges conventional epistemologies in social and human sciences. Drawing from phenomenology, negative theology, and Daoist philosophy, it argues that certain truths – particularly those related to existential, ethical, artistic, and spiritual dimensions – cannot be grasped through propositional knowledge alone but are instead encountered in moments of ineffability. Through an engagement with concepts such as “*die Sache*” and “*Gelassenheit*” (Heidegger) and *Wu Wei* (Daoism), the chapter proposes an epistemology that transcends mastery, moving towards mystery. Using examples from research on grief and existential health, it highlights how apophatic thinking facilitates a deeper resonance with phenomena, fostering a “Community of Wonder” within reflective practice research. Ultimately, it suggests that by embracing not-knowing, researchers can open new pathways for wisdom-seeking and transformative understanding.

### Keywords:

*Apophatic epistemology, reflective practice research, contemplative wonder, negative phenomenology, Gelassenheit, Wu Wei.*

### Prologue

There are deep experiences in life that are very quiet and fragile and yet so profound and meaningful that when touched by these experiences, you feel elevated by a strange, enigmatic sense of connectedness to the world, another person, or a part of yourself that might best be called your soul. These deep experiences are not to be seen as exotic or grand, extraordinary experiences; their depth is bound to the common everyday life, but we usually are not aware of them. And when we become aware of them – like when be

ing in grief and sensing life from the shadows and yet in that very moment also experiencing a strange feeling of being carried or being enveloped by a peculiar light from within this darkness – we are overwhelmed by wonder. This kind of deep contemplative wonder makes us speechless. What we have experienced is ineffable. Even so, we need to find words that somehow point to the strange meaningfulness, resonance, or ‘calling’ that was at stake in that moment. Wanting to find words or names for the wordless and nameless is, of course, a paradox and an impossible achievement. It is – as both Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein express it – like running against the boundaries of language from within.

Let me briefly give you a personal experience that had this wondrous calling built into it. I was interviewing young couples who were grief-stricken over the loss of their child either during the delivery or shortly after birth. The purpose of the phenomenological-oriented Reflective Practice Research I was doing was to inquire into how the existential dimension of grief (Guldin & Leget, 2024) among young parents after the loss of a child might be approached not only from the standpoint of ‘medical treatment’ or ‘psychotherapeutic’ approaches but also through experiences with art and subsequent philosophising, meaningful dialogue, and communities of wonder.

When asked if they were sometimes relieved in their grief by art experiences or the intimate conversations upon the great existential questions that often follow such an unfathomable loss, many of them hesitated to answer. They became quiet and thoughtful, as if they were listening to their lived experiences when contemplating such questions of meaning and existence. Some of them went on to say that, yes, music at times helped them as a kind of strange medium where the grief was allowed to be itself and have its voice in a way that – when caught in the musical moment – made their grief into a friend. I found that description thought-provoking. How and why does grief become a friend through encounters with art?

Another parent said that yes, music helps her too, but when she needed to dwell upon existential questions, she felt most inspired when walking in nature. Nature, she said with a smile, somehow embraced her in her sorrow. In those moments, she said, she felt very ‘present-in-the-world’ and in resonance with nature, as if being with a good friend. This made me – after the interviews – indeed wonder at the relationship between art, philosophy, and nature and why there seems to be a strange, ‘friendly’, embracing dimension connected to the art and philosophising experience on the one hand and, on the other, the experience of nature-connectedness. Might there be a

metaphysical or spiritual dimension to grief that goes beyond the paradigms of medical science and psychological therapies? What would a health concept look like that originates from a deep encounter and ‘dialogue’ with art, philosophy, and nature? Might we here see the germ of a new concept of ‘Existential Health’, not to be confused with the medical-physical and therapeutic-mental health concepts? What kind of research is needed when wanting to approach such delicate and ineffable experiences and wonderments? (cf. Hansen, 2022b, 2023a&b, 2024a, b, c)

### **The need to start from deep wonder**

I relate this example of actual experience and wonder at the outset of this essay because my focus will be on how to do Reflective Practice Research from within a deep sense of wonderment. What kind of epistemology (and ontology) will follow this kind of wonder-based practice research? My suggestion is what I term “Apophatic Epistemology”<sup>2</sup> or better, “The Dao of Reflective Practice Research”.

The example is one of ‘delicate matters’ that are difficult (if at all) to grasp through the traditional scientific analysis and methods. These matters are ineffable and unmeasurable, and yet so important when wanting to do research on what matters in human lives, in health, education, and welfare. To connect or gain resonance with these matters, the researcher needs to be within a practice-near and practice-reflective approach and mindset that touches the researcher in an existential way. The matter in focus needs to somehow resonate with the researcher in a deeply phenomenological and heartfelt way. But it also needs to resonate with the practitioners (or other practice researchers from other countries or universities that study the same delicate matter), with whom the practice researcher is in ongoing collaboration and dialogue.

This form of what I term Apophatic Reflective Practice Research, no matter whether it is in the area of health, higher education or welfare (Hansen et al., 2023), is characterized by a special kind of listening openness and attentiveness towards that which *cannot* be knowable in the language of representation and propositions or through rigorous systematic use of scientific methods and epistemology. It is a hermeneutic universality of ‘not-knowing’ that indirectly points to a living ontological truth beyond scientific (theory- and method-driven) language and practices (Wittgenstein, 1988, 1998; Fiumara, 2006; Franke, 2018, 2020). It is not a universal truth

understood as *essence* – that would be too metaphysical in a rationalistic and systematic sense – but as an ontological event and experience (in German, *Wesenheit* or *Sachheit*).

This kind of truth understanding stays close to the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer when, in *Truth and Method* (2006/1960), he claims there is a truth experience, or rather a ‘Truth Event’, that natural science and social science cannot sense. What is special within the science of humanities, or “*Geist Wissenschaft*”, he says, is another kind of openness and ‘being-in-the-world’ that finds its ultimate ideal in the experiences of art and philosophy. In these artistic and philosophical experiences, the living ontological universality is found – not in the *particularity* of a phenomenon (that would be to subject the uniqueness and truth of a phenomenon under an abstract generalization) – but in the *singularity* of a phenomenon. It is not the particularity of a specific human being (what and how she is) that constitutes a person’s uniqueness and irreplaceability, but the wonder *that* she is and *who* she is.

Why is it that the traces of a phenomenon’s singularity become visible in aesthetic and philosophical experiences? It is because these experiences are immersed in deep wonder. The sense of wonder gives you a kind of ‘sixth sense’ for that which transcends what our physical five senses can perceive and on which the natural and social sciences are grounded. When writing, reading, or thinking in deep wonder, the act of writing, reading, and thinking becomes an act of listening and silence (Fiumara, 2006). When being in an aesthetical (*passive receptive*) wonder and artistic creation on the one hand and in a philosophical (*active and responding*) wonder and Socratic reflection on the other hand, you find yourself placed (or displaced) in a position where you *do not* know where you are and where to go, and yet you also sense a strange resonance with ‘something’ that calls your attention. You are in that moment of deep wonder, standing in the Openness (Gadamer, 2006; Hansen, 2010), and from there you can sense the kind of universality and singularity that social and natural science cannot sense.

By deep wonder, I mean contemplative wonder, and not inquisitive wonder, which is the scientific knowledge-, explaining- and cause-seeking kind of wonder (Schinkel, 2021). By contemplative wonder, I mean wisdom-, love- and meaning-seeking wonder in the old, philosophical Greek sense. Plato and Aristotle named this kind of wonder “*thau-mazein*”, and they pointed to this wonder as the starting point for the philosophical practice, which in Greek was called *philo-sophia*. *Philo* means ‘to love’ or ‘to be a friend of’, and *Sophia* means wisdom. Thus, *philo-sophia*

means ‘the love of wisdom or to be a lover or friend of wisdom’. Hence, the philosopher does not possess wisdom; no, he or she is only searching and striving to be near it. But *what* wisdom is, is for the philosopher (and some would say for humankind as such) always to be seen as a kind of ‘moving horizon’. It is this form of contemplative philosophising and a ‘Community of Wonder’ (Hansen, 2015a, b; Hansen & Dinkins, 2016) that you as a reflective practice researcher must learn in cooperation and dialogues with the practitioners (‘the Insiders’) in the field and with other practice researchers who are also inquiring into the same delicate matters as you are.

### **Living our way into the truth of our subjects**

My point of departure is that we, humans, will never quite reach wisdom in a knowable scientific way and become God-like ‘knowers of wisdom’. If we think the human mind and scientific language of representation and propositions can grasp it all in *A Theory of Everything* (cf. Wilber, 2000), then we show a radical lack of what the French philosopher of Being, Gabriel Marcel, coins as “ontological humility” (Marcel, 1950). This ontological humility is nurtured by deep wonder, where we stand in the openness of a radical not-knowing relation to ourselves and the world, in contrast to the scientific knowledge-searching and method-led natural science. Or as Wittgenstein writes: “*Man has to awaken to wonder – and so perhaps do people. Science [natural science] is a way of sending him to sleep again.*” (Wittgenstein, 1998, p. 7).

Thus, this kind of ethical and existential wisdom cannot be grasped by scientists or be scientifically explained. This kind of contemplative wisdom may indeed inspire great natural scientists like Einstein or Bohr to get out of their current scientific paradigms for a short while to help them invent a new scientific paradigm. But then the ‘jump’ is made on the aesthetic or philosophical (or religious) ground, not on the scientific ground, if we are to follow Wittgenstein and Gadamer (Edwards, 1989; Lawn, 2006). In poetry, dance, music, painting, etc., or in deep philosophical wonderments and dialogues, in short, in the aesthetic and philosophical experiences, we will, as Gadamer indicates, have another language and way of thinking that *can* open us up to sense the ineffable.<sup>3</sup> You cannot know scientifically what a ‘good life’ is or what the meaning of life is. This will always stand as a philosophical question and a living mystery. Or, as Wittgenstein writes in *Tractatus*: “*Not how the world is the mystical, but that it is. We feel that even*



*if all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched.*" (Wittgenstein, 1988, # 6.52).

Even so, we might, though, *live* our way to getting a deeper 'heartfelt' sense of wisdom, but when reflecting on these life experiences, the reflections need to be done 'in the dark' through deep wonder, as when the photographer in the old days stood in his photographic darkroom developing his photo 'negatives' into 'positive' completed photos.

Being a nurse or a teacher, or being a professional per se that works with humans and 'human-centred professions', you will be encountering experiences and questions of a philosophical, existential, and ethical kind, such as, 'What is human flourishing? What are the most meaningful ways of living? What are the phenomena of care, love, dignity, friendship, meaning, hope, or joy of life?' These life phenomena are experiences and virtues that 'problems of life' are made of if they are not tended to in a wise or wisdom-seeking way.

In this chapter, I will argue that Reflective Practice Research on themes, experiences, and phenomena related to the existential, ethical, philosophical, aesthetical, and maybe even spiritual dimensions of nursing, teaching, or human-centred professions requires a special kind of wisdom-seeking and '*apophatic*' research approach, with deep wonder at its centre.

Let me add one more thing. It is interesting that when *really* being in deep wonder, you also sense the *limitations* of a human-centred position. When being in deep wonder, you start noticing the wonders of the world, or rather, the wonders *in* ordinary, everyday life. The world around you becomes 're-enchanting', as if seeing it for the first time (Hansen, Eide & Leget, 2023). This also gives you an inner ear, or musicality, for hearing what is *not* only human life but 'more-than-human life' (Abram, 2017; Kotva, 2022).

Deep wonder can, in other words, give you a sense of the interconnectedness with nature and the planetary life and the whole we are just a tiny (but unfortunately too disturbing) part of. Or as the environmental ethicist Julia Moore writes: "I think that a sense of wonder is a virtue in at least this sense, finding what it means to be fully human in a celebration of our place in the more-than-human world." (Moore, 2005, p. 273).

In this wonder-event, phenomenologists of wonder describe (Keen, 1969; Heidegger, 1994; Arendt, 2019; Schinkel, 2021; Keltner, 2023) that you will become more attuned to the wholeness of Being or Nature as such. In that awe- and wonder-inducing moment, you are, as it were, strangely feeling at home in the world as if welcomed or embraced and at the

same time called upon by a phenomenon or event to give a personal response to this calling (Herholdt-Lomholdt, 2018; Hansen, 2008, 2023a). This is indeed a mysterious and wonder-provoking experience.

In the following, I will reflect on how one can understand this kind of contemplative wonder in education and teaching. I will also unfold why I think that “apophatic epistemology” may qualify the notion of “kaleidoscopic epistemology”, which has now become a notion to be used in “Reflective Practice Research” (Weiss & Helskog, 2023). The kind of wonder-based epistemology I want to raise awareness of is a kind of ‘negative epistemology’ (pointing to what ‘positive’, even kaleidoscopic, epistemology cannot grasp and gain knowledge about). I prefer, at the end of the chapter, though, not to talk about ‘apophatic epistemology’<sup>4</sup>, which is a paradoxical term, but about the *Dao* of Reflective Practice Research. In the Daoist notion of *Wu Wei*, which means ‘non-action’ or ‘effortless action’ (Nelson, 2021), we can find a new apophatic way of understanding action and thereby also a new way of understanding action research and action in Reflective Practice Research.

The chapter has three sections. In the first section, I elaborate on why this kind of apophatic practice-near research is not to be confused with well-known theorists on practice epistemology and practice research, such as Lewis, Argyris, Schön, Wenger, Dreyfus & Dreyfus, and lately Eikeland. Hubert Dreyfus, though, in his latest thinking comes, as I will show, very near to what I term “Apophatic Epistemology” or the “Dao of Reflective Practice Research”. I end the first section by presenting what I call ‘The Four Voices in Reflective Practice Research’.

In the second section, I briefly unfold the three dimensions connected to Apophatic Epistemology, with a special emphasis on the Being- and Mystery-dimensions. Here, I describe four (two in the Knowledge-dimension and one in the Being- and Mystery-dimensions) different ways of looking at a teaching practice (or rather ‘praxis’) where we, especially in the Mystery-dimension, experience the peculiar feeling of ‘being-seen’ and ‘acting in virtue of’ the phenomenon we dwell upon and are in resonance with. It is when I turn to the Mystery-dimension that the notion of *Wu Wei* and the *Dao* of Reflective Practice Research becomes relevant.

In the concluding third section, I sum up the points of this essay and end by briefly describing how I work with the Knowledge-, Being-, and Mystery-dimensions of Reflective Practice Research from an apophatic and Daoist perspective.

## Section I: Apophatic Epistemology in Today's Reflective Practice Research (RPR).

The kind of caring and wonder-fuelled thoughtfulness that may follow pedagogical tactfulness in a teaching situation is not to be confused with either the analytical, detached “reflection-on-action” (*scientific or theoretical knowledge*) or the pragmatic involved “reflection-in-action” and “knowing-in-action” (*practical-functional knowing*), now well-known terms from the American practice researcher Donald Schön and his idea of *The Reflective Practitioner* (Schön, 1983).

In the very beginning of the development of practice research and action research with Lewis and Argyris, practice-near research was still led by a *theory-led* approach (theoretical knowledge or ‘*a priori*’ epistemology). Here, the scientists at the universities are led by their theoretical work, and afterwards, they inquire into how to apply these theories to practice and daily living. This kind of action research and practice research can be described as ‘Applied Science’.

However, when Schön describes the way materials in an engineer’s or designer’s hand speak back, or Schön describes the relation to the things and surroundings as “backtalk of the situation”, this is understood from a much more radical practice-led approach. The kind of knowledge produced here cannot be produced in the universities’ internal labs or only through theory. Knowing-in-action and reflection-in-action are knowing and reflection that can only be done, produced, and experienced in concrete practice, like teaching or craftsmanship.

Schön’s practice epistemology, though, rests on a worldview and philosophical assumptions that can be found within a materialistic, functionalistic, and constructivist paradigm (Hansen, 2014; Jahnke, 2023). Here, practical knowing is connected to the repertoire of practical, situated, tacit, and intuitive experiences and ‘know-how’, which are embodied in concrete practice and professional communities. A way of thinking that later Wenger worked to further with his concept of “Situated Learning” and “Practice Communities” (Wenger, 1999).

In both cases, we stay on the functional level of problem-solving and in a contextualist and constructivist view of values and beliefs as a process of human-made ‘meaning-making’. The work of American practice researchers on practical intuition, Stuart and Hubert Dreyfus from 1988 (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1988) up to the millennium, also operates within a primarily pragmatic and constructivist approach to intuitive knowing-in-

practice. Drawing on the philosophy of Martin Heidegger (2004), Hubert Dreyfus, for many years, believed that their approach to tacit and intuitive knowledge could be understood as existential. The Dreyfuses also talked against the theory- and technically led practitioner, but instead of Schön's ideal of the *Reflective Practitioner*, they suggested the ideal of the *Intuitive Expert*. This expert reflects from within practice but in an intuitive pattern, finding a way that may optimise the practitioner's ability to function and solve a problem within a concrete situation in ways that go beyond both theoretical reflection-on-action and practical reflection-in-action.

Stuart and Hubert Dreyfus later (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 2004) added a new kind of expert to their model, which was connected partly to Aristotle's concept of "phronesis" (*practical wisdom*) (Aristotle, 2012) and to a new interpretation of Heidegger's *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1962). Phronesis should, they emphasised, not be understood as a kind of practical reason in contrast to theoretical reasoning, as Aristotle scholars like MacIntyre (1981), Nussbaum (1985), Sherman (1989), and Dunne (1993) did, but as an 'intuition-in-the-moment'.

In 2004, Hubert Dreyfus discovered that in their former research, they had based their Intuitive Expert model on a too pragmatic interpretation of Heidegger's notion of "Being-in-the-World". As we shall see briefly elaborated in the next section, Heidegger fundamentally viewed practical knowing (and phronesis) in a radically different way than the Aristotelian rationalists (like MacIntyre, Nussbaum, and Dunne) or the way pragmatists and constructivists did (like Dewey and Rorty), although Heidegger's thinking is indeed connected to practice-near thinking.

The Dreyfuses now talk about a new kind of expert, which they call the "*Cultural Master*" (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 2004). This cultural master does not only draw on the practical perception, information, and pattern recognition intuitively grasped in the concrete situation and concrete function of a specific practice (like the practice of a teacher or a woodworker), she also intuitively draws on the broader culture this practice is placed in (like the Norwegian culture, for example) and tacit cultural assumptions taken for granted in this broader cultural context. Being able to draw on this broader cultural source allows the practitioner to be more creative than the Intuitive Expert and to "think outside the box", that is, out of the functional, narrow context that the Intuitive Expert operates from.

Finally, in this period, Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus even added a third type of expert – the existentialistic "World-Discloser". This person goes further than drawing on the broader cultural sources. He or she can also

question the broader cultural assumptions and values embodied here in a deep philosophical (existentialistic) way so that this person becomes a creator of new values and new worldviews. You could say that this is the Nietzschean ‘Übermensch’ or Sartrean ‘Existentialist’ (Sartre, 2007/1946).

Later, as we will see, Hubert Dreyfus discovers in Heidegger’s late philosophy (Heidegger, 1966, 2004) notions of *Gelassenheit* and “the shining of things”, which indicate that you can also be-in-the-world in an even more profound and deeper way, which – Hubert Dreyfus does not give a specific name to this last expert position – I call *The Servant of the Moment* (Hansen, 2008, 2010). Here, we encounter a new paradigm in Hubert Dreyfus’ late thinking, which could be described as the “Meaning-receiving-paradigm” (Dreyfus & Kelly, 2011; see also Hansen, 2010).

## From practice-epistemology to praxis-ontology

I now want to turn to a contemporary practice and action researcher, the Norwegian philosopher Olav Eikeland. He is interesting because he has, for many years, been in the field of practice research and action research and developed a special kind of “Insider Praxis Research” (Eikeland, 2012, 2015) while drawing especially on the practice philosophy of Aristotle (Eikeland, 2008). He follows Aristotle when Aristotle makes his pivotal distinctions between theoretical knowledge (in Greek: *episteme*), technological knowing (in Greek: *techné*), practical wisdom (in Greek: *phronesis*), and contemplative wisdom (in Greek: *Sophia*). Especially when we work with practical and contemplative wisdom, Eikeland emphasizes another Aristotelian distinction, namely that between *practice* and *praxis*.

Practice is an activity that does not have an end or value in and of itself. Practice is a means for something else, as when I drink water, being very thirsty, I do not drink water because water in itself is a value or a pleasure to drink, but because water is a means to quench my thirst. Or when art is used as a means by an art therapist for psychological treatment, art is not seen as a value and practice with its telos, its intrinsic meaningfulness, like a true artist does when they are in an artistic creation.

Praxis, on the other hand, is exactly when what we do is a value in and of itself. Praxis is action and activities done without external goals or purposes. Like when being deeply engaged in a subject matter in a teaching or learning situation, and the teacher and students are absorbed in the subject (like in a community of wonder about this subject). In these situations, they

listen and do their thing because they must have this course on this subject to pass an examination to finish their education to get a job. Hence, you can talk about practice-led teaching (or practice-led student learning) and praxis-led teaching (or praxis-led student learning). The latter will often be described as a process of *Bildung* (in Norwegian: *Danning*), which is a self-transformative kind of learning (Hagtvet & Ognjenovic, 2011).

Eikeland connects praxis to practical and contemplative wisdom (*phronesis* and *Sophia*), whereas practice is connected to theoretical and technical knowledge (*episteme* and *techné*). Praxis is also described as an exercise of *Skholê*, which is Greek for ‘free space’ for reflection and dialogue, based on praxis experiences.

Now, where does he differ from Schön and the early works of Stuart and Hubert Dreyfus’ practice epistemologies? He acknowledges Schön’s practice epistemology. He describes Schön’s notion of ‘knowing-in-practice’ as a good example of what reflective practice researchers should pay attention to and have respect for and take their departure from within, namely, what Eikeland terms “the grammar of practice” (Eikeland, 2007, 2012). However, he finds Schön’s practice epistemology and his concepts of ‘reflection-on-action’ and ‘reflection-in-action’ to be too unvarnished, only staying on the level of technical and pragmatic forms of practical knowledge.

Eikeland, too, like later Dreyfus & Dreyfus, points to practical wisdom as something that Schön’s and similar practice epistemologies (like Wenger’s) do not have a sufficient understanding of. Eikeland emphasizes that *phronesis* is not just “practical cleverness” used to solve practical problems smartly. It is neither “prudence” nor “... an ability to discriminate, understand and assess the particular situation correctly in purely descriptive terms.” (Eikeland, 2001, p. 149). The concept of *phronesis* must be understood in a much more philosophical way, he thinks, as a part of the *philosophia*, that is, as the love of wisdom. *Phronesis* is therefore connected to the ethical reflection of the ‘why’ of doing a specific activity. How can I do this activity ethically and wisely, not just for the benefit of myself or the company or just for optimizing this activity, but why is this (or is it not?) activity or action good in an ethical sense? How do I and the persons involved in this activity become better ethical (virtuous) persons by doing this activity, and why and how can this activity, in the bigger picture, create a better (a more ethically grounded) world? These are, Eikeland claims, the deliberations and choices one needs to do to act with practical wisdom (*phronesis*). As he writes:

“Phronesis is especially an ability to deliberate about and choose means for achieving ethically and politically good objectives. It presupposes knowledge of ethical and political ‘virtue’”. (Eikeland, 2001, p. 148).

To be trained in phronesis, practical wisdom, and judgement, demands, Eikeland says, primarily two things: praxis and dialogue. We need a free space, and we need dialogue between people to strengthen the sense of communion (polis) and a sense of what is ethical.

Eikeland only very briefly comments on the Dreyfus brothers’ notion of the intuitive expert. In a footnote (Eikeland, 2001, p. 154), he critiques them for saying that intuitive expertise is beyond articulation and deliberation, stating that they nevertheless tacitly presuppose the existence of formulated rules in every field for beginners to follow. By doing so, Eikeland argues, they also overlook inchoate activities in fields where no rules or expertise exist.

Now, it can be argued, as has been done already by others (Hansen, 2008, 2010) and indicated previously in this essay, that Dreyfus & Dreyfus’s notion of intuition and the ideal of the intuitive expert is based on tacit, unconscious pattern recognition. And these patterns are what Eikeland rightly calls “the grammar of practice”. But what Eikeland would see if he follows the thinking of Hubert Dreyfus is that Dreyfus later searched for a new way of understanding intuition that indeed allowed the practical expert to live and thrive out in the open as a spontaneous, pattern-free being-with-the-phenomenon, that is, in a creative and existential Openness that has no firm rules or grammar. Out there, you may add, it no longer makes sense to use the word *expert* – meaning the person who really ‘knows’ – because in this situation of deep openness and listening towards that which does not yet exist but calls to existing, you are driven by the unknown and yet calling (Hansen, 2022a, 2023a).

A person in deep contemplative wonder is not an expert. He or she is rather a sort of ‘artist’ or a ‘philosopher’ by heart, or maybe even a ‘spiritual seeker’ in his or her profession, say nursing or teaching. The French apophatic philosopher Jacques Derrida points to this position of being in Nowhere and yet feeling at home in this non-knowing wonder: “I am trying, precisely, to put myself at a point so that I do not know any longer where I am going.” (Derrida – cited from Rubenstein, 2011, p. 133)

Now, my criticism of Eikeland’s Praxis Insider Research is briefly stated (see more in Hansen, 2022b): Eikeland’s concept of phronesis and praxis continues to rest on the idea of pattern recognition, which is inherent in his key notion of “the grammar of practice”. Eikeland stays on an epis-

temological level when investigating practice as an insider. He even calls his action research philosophy, Praxis Research, a “Gnoseology of praxis” (Eikeland, 2007).

However, the kind of praxis-epistemology Eikeland is a representative of is not what we normally call ‘epistemology’ in modern social and human science, defined as how to gain scientific knowledge and develop theories to explain a practice. In one article, he refers to phenomenological and hermeneutic key expressions like “shines through” and “die Sache” when he talks about what kind of tacit and embodied “pattern of common standard” he connects to the grammar of a practice.

Apprentices approximate and train themselves into the same form or pattern by imitation, experimentation, dialogue, and supervision, not striving to become identical to a particular master but to what “shines through” the masterly practice. The form or pattern of a common standard, “die Sache”, “saken”, or the “what-it-means-to-do-or-be-something”, is separable as reflectively reified in thinking and, as such, separate from any individual master (Eikeland, 2012, p. 38).

Eikeland also alludes briefly to the concept of “Tao” or “Dao” from the Chinese practical philosophy of Daoism, where Dao means ‘The Way’. “Dialogue was the Way (hê hodôs/Tao).” (Eikeland, 2015, p. 386). This Dao, or Way of contemplative praxis research, could, he says, also be described as a Theoria-based way of reflection and having dialogues to come to “die Sache” in Praxis Research.

Like Aristotle, Eikeland also makes a distinction between theory and Theoria<sup>5</sup>. Where the modern concept of theory is connected to episteme and technê to explain and master practice, theoria, on the other hand, is connected to phronesis and Sophia as contemplative ways of thinking to better ‘get into’ or deeply understand praxis from within. This kind of contemplative thinking is not a detached or intellectual or abstract-academic reflection like scientific, explaining-seeking reflections and wonderments would be. Contemplative thinking (theoria) is embodied in the lived experience (Erlebnis, as Eikeland calls it) of the person who thinks. The contemplative thinking and dialogue around these lived experiences transform the lived experiences into thoughtful experiences that are “... accumulated practical experiences exercised/habituated into us” (Eikeland, 2012, pp. 24–25), which he then calls ‘Erfahrung’. Theoria is insider-thinking, which is praxis-knowing led by so-called “epistemological impulses” (Eikeland, 2006). By epistemological impulses, he refers to the sense one can have in a dialogue and community of inquiry around a shared experience that



leads to the emergence of certain standards or common patterns or principles (a grammar) that become visible to reflective or better contemplative practitioners (see also Eikeland, 2015, p. 386).

Eikeland has not elaborated further on what he shortly alluded to as “Tao” and “die Sache”, which, as I said, are concepts to be found in the tradition of Daoism and the existential phenomenology of Heidegger and the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer.

In another inquiry (Hansen, 2022b) into the way Eikeland thinks about what I term ‘Praxis-epistemology’ as opposed to ‘Practice-epistemology’, I ask critically where the “ontological impulses” might be in reflective practice research. And by ontological impulses, I refer to Heidegger’s understanding of ontology as a ‘living ontology, that is, the real-phenomenological sense (*Stimmung*) of presence or just the Being-dimension of a praxis, which cannot be described or understood only through certain human-made standards or common patterns or principles of how to cope with or master a situation, a profession, or a society (*polis*).

The later Heidegger would talk about the ‘Voice or Call of Being’, which may happen if you suddenly experience an openness to the mysteries in life. Where epistemology in all its forms tries to master the world, this Being-dimension opens an opportunity to go from mastery to mystery (Marcel, 1950; Bannon, 2014), from a problem-solution perspective to a mystery-embracing perspective, or from a ‘positive epistemology’ to what I call an apophatic and ‘negative epistemology’.

But before I go deeper into what apophatic epistemology is, let me now sum up the positions of practice and action research I have touched on in section I. In the figure I call ‘The Four Voices in Reflective Practice Research’ (see the figure below), I work with four orientations or two axes: 1) the Practice-Praxis axis and 2) the Theory-Theoria axis.

These four orientations also exhibit four different voices in professional practice, such as in the teaching profession or higher education. In teaching and teacher-student education, these four orientations or voices will always be at play: 1) The Voice of the System, which is connected to the prevailing rules, standards, structures, culture, and grammar of a profession; 2) the Voice of Knowledge, which is the scientific and professional voice of a profession; 3) the Voice of Personal Being, which, in this case, is the being of the person (her existential self) who works in this profession, experiencing it from a one-person perspective. Finally, 4) the Voice of Ethical Callings, or the Thou of the phenomenon, which Gadamer and Heidegger call “die

Sache”, Buber calls “the Thou” in the I-Thou relation (Buber, 2013/1923)<sup>6</sup>, and the Daoist calls “The Dao” (Chai, 2020, 2022, Nelson, 2021).

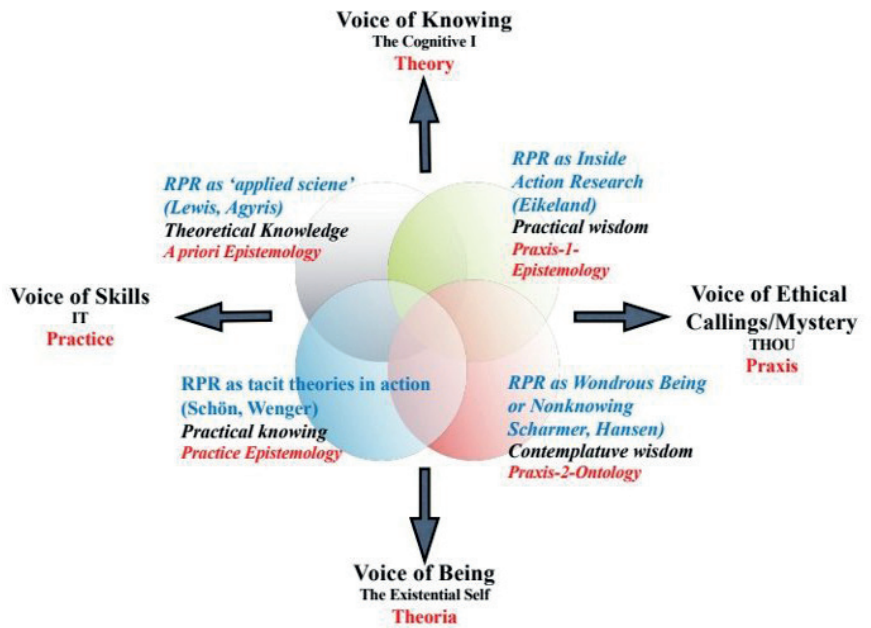
As you will see from the horizontal axis, with Buber’s concepts, I connect the I-It relation to the Voice of the System, or practice-led research, and the I-Thou relation to the Voice of Ethical Callings, or praxis-led research. The second vertical axis in the model, I connect the Voice of Knowing to the cognitive I, or consciousness, and theory-led research. Whereas the Voice of Being is connected to the existential self (‘Dasein’ in Heideggerian terms) and theoria-led research.

The circles in the middle show and indicate that Reflective Practice Research is a multidimensional activity where all kinds of epistemologies need to be considered, but in contemporary reflective practice research, there is an imbalance because of the lack of awareness of both the Voice of personal Being and the Voice of the Ethical Callings. The fourth space in the right corner, which I call the space for Wondrous Being, is not concerned with displaying theoretical, practical, or praxis knowledge. In this space, we leave the theory-led and practice-led epistemological approaches, and through the apophatic ‘liminal’ epistemology as a transitory passage, we indirectly point to a living and existential ontology (and even trans-ontology), which cannot be defined, said, or known in scientific (epistemological and methodological) terms or paradigms. It works with what the German-American practice researcher C. O. Scharmer terms “not-yet-embodied knowledge” (Scharmer, 2007).

Later, when we discuss the three dimensions of apophatic epistemology – the Knowledge-, Being-, and Mystery-dimensions – the first three spaces are all spaces describing the Knowledge-dimensions in different forms, whereas the last fourth space is where we find the Being- and Mystery-dimensions that are otherwise and go beyond the epistemological Knowledge-dimension. It is also in this fourth space that we find a way to better understand on an ontological-phenomenological level what practical and contemplative wisdom (phronesis and Sophia) is in a practical profession as well as what ‘the ethical Call’ is in a concrete situation or relation that calls a teacher to act in a ‘tactful’ or wise way (Van Manen, 2015). The tactfulness of the reflective practice researcher would be, carefully, to go to the limit of the established knowledge, led by the call of that which cannot be grasped or expressed by the Voice of the System, the Voice of (theoretical) Knowing, nor by the Voice of (embodied) Being (the existential self). At these borders, the researcher might get into a deep contemplative wonder. If so, then the reflective (or rather wondrous) practice researcher can

hear the Voice of Die Sache, or the Ethical Calling of the inquired phenomenon.

In my case, when researching parents in grief described in the prologue, I needed to radically question my cultural assumptions and scientific knowledge as well as personal (embodied) preferences of what grief is to open myself to a new insight that some more existential or spiritual dimensions of grief might only be understood through experiences of nature, art, and philosophy and not through medical science and psychological therapeutic approaches. The grieving parents’ answers in the interviews brought me to these borders and into a deep wonder.



Section II: From Mastery to Mystery

To hear the voice of ‘die Sache’ or Dao in Reflective Practice Research

The German philosopher and art theorist Walter Benjamin provides a good metaphor for the enigmatic dynamic between the ineffable *impressions*, what I here have termed the ethical sayings or callings (*die Sache*) on the one hand, and the concrete human-made *expressions* of these impres-

sions in language and artefacts on the other hand. When these expressions manage to point to *Die Sache*<sup>7</sup> indirectly, they become artwork with a high aura<sup>8</sup>.

Benjamin claims that especially the artist (and the philosopher and spiritual practitioner) has a ‘threshold existence’ between *die Sache* and human-made manifestations of *die Sache*, knowing intuitively that what has been expressed in an artwork can only be understood as the ‘ashes of the fire’. The fire here is *die Sache*, and the impressions are the sparks coming from this fire. When the artist is in the artistic creation (or the philosopher in deep wonder), the artist (or philosopher) is listening to and in resonance with this enigmatic and ineffable impression and tries to articulate or give a material form to it. As Benjamin writes, “The work is the death mask of its conception” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 459). What he means here is that with the artwork, the truth or the resonance with the sacred and ‘sparks of transcendence’<sup>9</sup> have coagulated. We now see in the artwork only the death mask of the once living and mysterious light or impression from the sacred that inspired the artist to create. Benjamin also describes the moment when the artist senses this mysterious light or ‘pure experience’ from the phenomenon and impression that has inspired the artist to create the artwork. He says that in that very moment, the thing or phenomenon suddenly looks back on you! (see Conty, 2013). Or as the Swiss painter Paul Klee writes in his notebook *The Thinking Eye*, “Now objects perceive me” (Klee, 1969). This is indeed a mysterious and strange experience, but an event that modern eco-phenomenologists (Abram, 2017; Kotva, 2022) touch upon nowadays. The world then becomes suddenly, strangely animated and enchanted for the human spectator of the world.

Now, let me briefly make the connection between the later Heidegger, whom Hubert Dreyfus, in his last writings, is inspired by, and the dimensions I connect to apophatic epistemology.

To talk about ‘apophatic epistemology’ is, as should now be clear, close to being a contradiction in terms. How can one write and talk about an apophatic *epistemology* – a logic and method of knowing – when apophatic thinking is all about what transcends human knowledge and even goes beyond human language? If you cannot write or talk about it, how can you then describe apophatic thinking?

Well, these are difficult and almost insurmountable questions – at least if you only arrived at them using the form of a logical discursive reflection. However, as apophatic thinkers from Pseudo-Dionysius to Cusanus to Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Derrida show (Rhodes, 2012; Franke, 2014),

there are ways of thinking – through paradoxes, deconstructions, negative dialectics, aesthetic intimations, meditation, art, playfulness, humour, irony, and by living in ecstatic and caring ways (Kotva, 2022) and, indeed, when immersed in deep contemplative awe and wonder and silence – that allow thought, or rather the soul, to be ignited by something, or rather ‘No-thing’.

Why? Because if we look upon a person or a phenomenon as a thing, as an object (as in an I-It relation, cf. Buber, 2019), we fall out of a resonant and dialogical I-Thou relation with that phenomenon.

Therefore, apophatic thinking works with ‘No-things’ in the I-Thou relation as a precondition for deep thinking and insight on an aesthetic, ethical, existential, and spiritual level. The apophatic epistemology is a preparation or ‘cleaning process’ to stand in the openness in deep wonder, listening, and non-knowing. The practice of apophatic epistemology is to dissolve itself to reach another non-epistemological level, which has to do with the Being- (the existential-ontological level) and Mystery-dimensions (the ethical-trans-ontological level). Going from epistemological to ontological and trans-ontological dimensions requires a personal (and spiritual<sup>10</sup>) transformation of the reflective practice researcher.

The apophatic, or ‘negative’, epistemological practice is a kind of Socratic deconstruction or de-freezing of currently used concepts, standards, grammar, assumptions, and meanings inherent both in the theory of a profession as well as in the practice epistemology (the knowing-in-practice) of this profession. The kind of capability that is needed is therefore a “*Negative Capability*” that was first coined by the British poet John Keats. He became aware of especially one capability that Shakespeare possessed so enormously, which was to accept and thrive in “uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” (Keats, 2002, p. 312)

Negative Capability is described by Keats as a capability to stay out in the open, seeing and hearing the wonders and mysteries around him in a patient, receptive, and passive way. It is a wondrous ‘non-knowing’ way of being-in-the-phenomenon and being-with-the-phenomenon that gives rise to a caring attitude, a strong imagination, and a special kind of ‘effortless action’ where it is life through the phenomenon or the situation that acts on you (is the centre of agency) rather than you being the agent of actions. This is what Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly in *All Things Shining* (Dreyfus & Kelly, 2011, p. 194) describe as “... the moment when the sacred shines (...) during which something overpowering happens that wells up before you as a palpable presence and carries you along as on a powerful way.”

In the case in the Prologue, I was inspired to ask whether grief also can be understood as a spiritual (or ‘sacred’ – in Dreyfus’ sense) event.

In Daoism, this kind of event that happens to the person is described with the Chinese word *Wu Wei* (Nelson, 2021). These moments are also described as “beautiful moments” in nursing (Herholdt-Lomholdt, 2018), “magic moments” (Kotva, 2022) in sports, or spiritual moments in therapy or spiritual practices.

In my article “How would an Apophatic Action Research look like?” (Hansen, 2022b) I give an in-depth description of the three dimensions of such apophatic and action-oriented practice research or ‘Wu Wei research’, as it were. Here it suffices to briefly describe the kind of attentiveness that comes into play when we work with the three dimensions in apophatic epistemology and reflective practice research, namely the Knowledge-, Being-, and Mystery-dimension<sup>11</sup>.

**Knowledge Dimension:** There are two levels of seeing connected to the Knowledge dimension in apophatic epistemology: to look *at* the field of practice and to look *with* field of practice.

To look at the field is the Outsider-spectator doing reflections-on-action and collecting theoretical and empirical knowledge as a Theoretical (and technical) Practitioner. The phenomenon is looked upon as an object to be inquired into. *A priori* epistemology leads this kind of looking, which is what typically also leads scientific inquiries. In *Being and Time* (1962), Heidegger calls this kind of attitude towards the world ‘present-at-hand’ (*Vorhandenheit*).

To look at the field is the Insider-approach, doing reflections-in-action and gathering insights embodied in the practice as tacit, embodied, situated, and intuitive knowledge. This kind of looking is led by Practice and Praxis Epistemologies and applied by the reflective practitioner and intuitive expert. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger calls this kind of attitude towards the world ‘ready-to-hand’ (*Zuhandenheit*).

What is important to know here is that Heidegger understands both levels of knowing as a knowing on the ontic level. When being on the ontic level, it is the pragmatic and cognitive self (the will to master the world), the pragmatic problem-solving and scientific explaining seeking ways of being that dominate. This was the discovery that Hubert Dreyfus made in his later works.

**Being-Dimension:** When Heidegger talks about Being (*Dasein* and *Sein*), and how humans also can be-in-the-world in a non-pragmatic and non-scientific but existential, reflective, and understanding way, he funda-

mentally places the self in a new position, which differs from the pragmatic and cognitive self. Now Heidegger talks about *Dasein* as a special kind of ‘being-there’-presence and attentiveness. *Being (Sein)* becomes the tacit horizon with which *Dasein* is in resonance. This relation could also be described as the emergence of the existential self in resonance with the world as a whole, and how the world appears, seen through this kind of Being-attentiveness. Now the person no longer looks *at* the field of, say, teaching, with a theoretical eye or looks *at* the field through the practice knowledge that the teachers gain through years of lived experiences of teaching. Now, the teacher is very present in an existential way of how life and concrete situations become or are experienced as deeply meaningful. The kind of gaze that follows *The Existential Practitioner* is, you could say, to gaze *into and from within* the living phenomenon. Note that when we are in an existential relation with the phenomenon-in-practice, we are now not only working with or sensing through the ‘ashes’ of the phenomenon, which the scientist (*The Theoretical Practitioner*) and pragmatist (*The Reflective Practitioner*) do. They only stay, as Heidegger would say, on the ‘ontic level’. *The Existential Practitioner*, on the other hand, is attentive to the ‘sparks’ flying up from the living phenomenon before it coagulates into what Benjamin called the ‘death mask’ of the phenomenon. So, at this phenomenological and existential-ontological level the person is in an ‘existential resonance’ (Rosa, 2019) with the phenomenon.

Mystery-Dimension: Finally, there is also a third level, the Mystery-Dimension, which is especially described in the Late Heidegger’s work (Capobianco, 2011, 2015, 2022) and followed up by apophatic thinkers like Levinas, Derrida, Marion, and Kotva. We could call this practitioner *The Contemplative Practitioner*, if we, by contemplation, think of a kind of thinking that is both aesthetical, philosophical, and spiritual, that is, a kind of sensing and philosophizing that opens for the ineffable wonders and living mysteries in daily life.

This is indeed also in the area where the Daoist eco-philosophers and eco-phenomenologists belong (Nelson, 2021). The kind of seeing or gaze that is happening here is trans-ontological (it goes beyond the kind of ontological horizon that *Dasein* or *The Existential Practitioner* can experience). It is a way of openness and receptiveness and ‘letting-be’– what Heidegger calls *Gelassenheit*. It is exactly here that we can find the similarities between Heidegger and Daoism when comparing the praxis of *Gelassenheit* with the Daoist notion of ‘*Wu Wei*’ as an active passivity or effortless action (Nelson, 2021, 2024). The kind of gaze that emerges in the practitioner

when being taken by the phenomenon or life itself is, as we saw, described by Walter Benjamin. It is the experience of being *seen by and to see in virtue of* the life phenomenon – of gazing at the world through the eyes of the life phenomenon itself (Marion, 2002). And the mood (*Grundstimmung*) that fills the person in these moments is deep wonder and awe (Han, 2024).

## Contemplative wonder as a gateway to die Sache selbst

Gadamer (2006) talked about the universality in philosophical hermeneutics that consequently breaks with today's widespread social constructionism, contextualism, and perspectivism. However, his notion of 'universality' cannot be understood only within the horizon of epistemology and methodology. He, too, like Heidegger, thinks beyond the ontic horizon. Thus, when Gadamer talks about universality and the experience and event of Truth (Gadamer, 2006, p 20–22), this must be understood within an existential-ontological horizon and from within an apophatic thinking and 'negative epistemology'. There *is* a Truth in the moment, a contact to *die Sache selbst*, but you will only be able to get in tune or resonance with that Truth if you approach this living truth from within the Being- and Mystery-dimension. Truth as an event that happens to you on an existential and ontological level (rather than seeking the truth through systematic reflections and rigorous methods on an epistemological and technical level) is *Gelassenheit* as a praxis (Harvey, 2009; Capobianco, 2014) or a praxis of *Wu Wei* (Nelson, 2021; Chai, 2022). The moment when you are closest to *die Sache selbst* (or the phenomenon in and by itself, cf. Marion, 2002) is when you are caught by a deep contemplative wonder and awe. This is the key signal telling you that you *are* on track for something real and truly mysterious and wondrous, that speaks back to you and maybe even, as Walter Benjamin would say, looks back on you.

In the introduction to this essay, I said that Apophatic Epistemology could be read as an important supplement to the kind of "Kaleidoscopic epistemology" that is described by Weiss and Helskog (2023) as an important metaphor for the epistemology behind their understanding of Reflective Practice Research. When talking about Kaleidoscopic epistemology, they refer, as a pedagogical means, to the well-known parable of the *Blind Men and the Elephant*. One blind man is certain that the truth of the elephant is what he concretely feels in his hand (which is only the tail of the elephant).



Another blind man insists that he has the truth, standing with one of the elephant's feet. And so on. This parable illustrates, as Kleineberg (2013) elaborates thoroughly on, the plurality of epistemic contexts and their related problem of relativism regarding human knowledge. I, too have met this parable many times, often in research environments or professional work (like in textbooks for systemic consultation) and often pushed forward by social constructivists, contextualists, or postmodernists who all want in different and heterogeneous ways to emphasize the contextuality and locality of 'a' truth being defended.

However, the story of *The Blind Men and the Elephant* can, as Kleineberg (2013) shows, also be used as a description of how modern science and neo-positivists today search for the Truth with a capital T (the Elephant), and of course acknowledging that the scientist must always as a rigor scientific principle be *on the way* to a new even deeper understanding of this Truth – as long as the scientist makes sure to stick to the 'correct' (objective) epistemology and methodology.

But neither Gadamer nor Heidegger (or Buber or Benjamin), can be located within this modern scientific or postmodern constructivist position. They go beyond this kind of thinking. Hence, the story of *The Blind Men and the Elephant* does not help us to understand what Kaleidoscopic epistemology is *if* it does not make clear how it differs from modern and postmodern use of this parable. With the apophatic epistemology, the Elephant itself is understood as *die Sache selbst* – or as the Dao of reflective practice research. The sense (or musicality or 'tactfulness') to experience this invisible (when seen from within an ontic and cataphatic horizon) living truth, is, as I already said, *the sense of wonder*. This kind of deep wonderment can be encountered in different shapes and forms of receptiveness in respectively the Being- and Mystery-dimension of a practice. Having done that in this chapter, I hope to have shown through an apophatic interpretation of the metaphor of 'The Elephant and the Blind Men' why the 'Kaleidoscopic epistemology' of Reflective Practice Research understood by Weiss & Helskog (2023), can be qualified further through the notion of 'Apophatic Epistemology' or the 'Dao of Reflective Practice Research'.

Let me now end on a more practical note<sup>12</sup> by connecting the practice of teaching to the relevance of the sense of wonder. The Canadian phenomenologist Max Van Manen has spent a lifetime in wonder at what good teaching and pedagogical tactfulness really are. He too, points to the sense of wonder as a gateway to getting into resonance with the concrete learning situation, and what is calling in that moment. He notes that deep won-

der follows silence. And reversely, through deep silence, deep wonder may emerge too.

True wonderment does not ask a thousand questions. I truly wonder, when the question I ask is returned to me somehow, or when it lingers and envelops itself with stillness, the stillness of wonder. (Van Manen, 2006, p. 19)

In addition to this description of the phenomenon of wonder, Van Manen wonders: “Can we bring children to wonder? Can one even ‘will’ oneself to wonder? Or is wonder more like a grace that visits us when we are open to it?” (ibid.) When reading Max Van Manen’s intriguing books and insights on what a good, tactful teacher is (Van Manen, 1991, 2006, 2015), the answer to the last question seems to be ‘yes, I think so’. Or rather, there seems to be a delicate balance or dynamic (dance) between effort and grace, because the teacher needs to cultivate and nurture an atmosphere of openness and wonder in her or himself and the classroom.

Thus, something *can* be done with some effort and will, but if the teacher (or students or reflective practice researcher) wills too much or falls back into a know-what, -know-why, and know-how-attitude, the magic or enchantment of wonder immediately evaporates. When deep wonder happens as a grace, it comes to the participants unexpectedly and in a way that surprises them or, even better, touches and grasps them, so they suddenly become humble and vulnerable. Then the tone of teaching and the dialogue between teacher and students, and students-to-students, change as when the sunlight in a dark room suddenly lights up and changes the atmosphere in a room. Now the room has miraculously become much more colourful, and trust and joy in life seem also now to appear among the people in this room. When this happens, people may become silent and very present as if they were listening to something very important that is on its way, but not quite there yet. If one senses it and finds words for it, it is typically described as a ‘magic moment’ or a feeling of wonder or awe (Keltner, 2023). Apophatic epistemology wants to be a thres- and placeholder for contemplation and awareness of these kinds of wonderful experiences and ‘truth events’.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Finn Thorbjørn Hansen is a Professor of Applied Philosophy, with a PhD in Educational Philosophy, at Aalborg University (Denmark). He has developed a phenomenological and wonder-based approach to action and reflective practice research through so-called Wonder Labs: <https://vbn.aau.dk/en/persons/finnth>

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘Apophatic’ derives in the West from the tradition of Negative Theology, in philosophy from Negative Ontology or Negative Phenomenology, and in the East from Daoism and Zen Buddhism, when saying that one should not give name to the nameless. To say, for example, in human language *what* God is, or *what* Being as such is, is to show a deeper lack of understanding of *that*, which cannot be ‘said’ directly – but only indirectly and in negative ways by a ‘saying’, which can only be a pointing act (Franke, 2014, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> In the tradition of negative theology, they talk about two ways to the ineffable: 1) the *Via Negativa*, which is the radical not-knowing and apophatic approach, and 2) the *Via Positiva*, which is a confirming ‘*kataphatic*’ way of ‘pointing’ to that which cannot be said directly in scientific or representative language and proportional statements, formulas or dogmas but only indirectly communicated through poetry, wondering-contemplative meditation, humor, metaphors and allegories. The philosophy of Gadamer can therefore be understood as a ‘kataphatic ontology’, whereas the more radical thinking of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Derrida is better understood as ‘apophatic ontology’.

<sup>4</sup> An iconic masterpiece of ‘apophatic epistemology’ is Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. Here he uses the rigorous and logical language of logical positivism to show from within their epistemology the fundamental limitations of exactly the thinking of logical positivism. In Wittgenstein’s apophatic epistemology, he, through negation, indirectly points to that (namely the ethical, aesthetical, and religious/spiritual experiences) which cannot be said and grasped from within the positivistic and logical paradigm (Edward, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Which indeed Gadamer and Heidegger also do, but their interpretations of Aristotle’s concepts of *praxis* and *theoria* are of a whole other kind than Eikeland’s. To say it briefly, where Eikeland reads Aristotle’s concepts in an ‘ontic’ (epistemological) way, Heidegger and Gadamer read Aristotle in an ‘ontological’ (existential-phenomenological) way.

<sup>6</sup> For a description of Martin Buber’s ontology and how one can relate his I-Thou and I-It philosophy to reflective practice research and to human- and phenomenon-centred professions and educations, see Hansen (2017, 2023a).

<sup>7</sup> Inspired by later Heidegger, Hubert Dreyfus calls *die Sache* what “shines through”, or ‘the sacred’, in 2011 (Dreyfus and Kelly, 2011). *die Sache* is here understood as an experience of transcendence, of something deeply meaningful but ineffable, that shines from the phenomenon in and by itself (*die Sache Selbst*). See also Marion (2002).

<sup>8</sup> This is not the place to do a philosophical elaboration of what Benjamin means with ‘the aura’ as a shining from what Benjamin (in a non-religious but spiritual way) called ‘the sacred’ and the later Heidegger calls “the divine” (“*Das Heilige*”). See Jørgensen (2014) and Benjamin & Vardoulakis (2015).

<sup>9</sup> Note that the French existential phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty, also points to this wondrous experience of transcendence that casts us into deep philosophical wonder when he writes, “The best formulation of the [phenomenological] reduction is probably that given by Eugen Fink, Husserl’s assistant, when he spoke of ‘wonder’ in the face of the world. Reflection does not withdraw from the world towards the unity of consciousness as the world’s basis; it steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire . . . ” (Merleau-Ponty, 2007/1945, p. xv).

<sup>10</sup> The kind of ‘spirituality’ and ‘spiritual transformation’ I am talking about here is a specific kind of *philosophical-spiritual* transformation and way of opening towards and getting into resonance with the living wonders and mysteries in daily life that we are surrounded by (Hadot, 1995; Kotva, 2022; Hansen, 2023a&b; Hansen, 2024a).

- <sup>11</sup> For an in-depth description of these three dimensions in the practice of phenomenology, see Thorsted & Hansen (2022).
- <sup>12</sup> For a more practical-pedagogical approach to how to facilitate wonder-based thinking and dialogues in reflective practice research and educational, innovative, and professional settings, see Hansen (2014, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2024a, c). A new dialogical model for creating ‘Communities of Wonder’, termed “*The Wonder Compass*”, is described in Hansen (2022a, 2023b, 2024c).

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## CHAPTER 3: ESTABLISHING COMMUNICATION IN INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

Ingrid Reite Christensen<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*In this chapter, I will explore the philosophical question of communication within the context of international collaboration. The focus of this article is a joint international project dedicated to democracy education in Ukraine and Norway. I narrate the story of two sessions at a seminar in Kyiv, where the first session followed a conventional academic presentation format, while the second session took an unconventional turn, having markedly different effects on the audience. I employ the methodological framework of philosophical inquiry (Helskog & Weiss, 2023; Helskog, 2019; Lindseth, 2021; Weiss, 2015), selecting one narrated case that delves into the philosophical query of “What is communication in international collaboration?”. With the starting point in the Kyiv seminar, I conduct an exploratory reflection on communication accompanied by selected readings, such as didactics, liberation pedagogy with a main emphasis on deconstruction and selected readings of Derrida. Rather than providing the keys to successful communication, the paper explores the dynamics of communication in international collaboration between success and failure.*

### Part 1 Introduction: The project of developing democracy education in Ukraine and the challenge of communication

Communication is at the core of an international project to succeed (Teunissen, Dierx et al., 2023, pp. 50–51). Effective communication is fundamental and a prerequisite for the approval of international projects<sup>2</sup>, demanding a thorough grasp of the partners’ contextual backgrounds, clear articulation of project goals and objectives, and a comprehensive assessment of potential risks of difference that might impede the project’s success. In this paper, I will explore communication in an international project on democ-

racy education in Ukraine and Norway – two countries with vastly different conditions for democracy. However, as this paper will reveal, the lack of communication represents a foundational risk.

The Eurasia-funded project “Developing Democracy in Teacher Education in Ukraine, Palestine, and Norway” (2017–2022) was developed between the University of South-Eastern Norway (USN), National Pedagogical Dragomanov University (NPDU) in Kyiv, Donbas State Pedagogical University in eastern Ukraine and the non-governmental organization Peace Research Institute in Palestine (PRIME), having a third-country advisory role. Using a “train-the-trainer” model, the project implemented democratic principles across various school subjects, including mathematics, science, and social science, as well as a course in philosophical dialogue in Ukraine.

There is no doubt that the contexts of a democracy education project in Ukraine and Norway are markedly different and have recently also been burdened by the present war in Ukraine. Yet, over the past decades, Ukraine has undergone significant societal changes as a post-Soviet country and has increasingly aligned itself with the European community over the last decade (Shyyan & Shyyan, 2023). Pre-war empirical research in Ukraine has primarily focused on the challenges of implementing civic education within a robust public education system (e.g., Fediy et al., 2021). In 2017, the national curriculum introduced the promotion of civic competencies across all subjects through the interdisciplinary theme of “Civil Responsibility” (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2017). Furthermore, in 2019, an interdisciplinary subject titled “I explore the world” was introduced, based on democratic learning methods (Ministry of Education Ukraine, 2019). Programmes for implementing democracy education in schools have garnered international attention, drawing inspiration from models proposed by the Council of Europe or the OECD’s 21st-century skills framework (The European Wergeland Centre, 2021; Kolesnyk and Biseth, 2023). The recent developments, including the war in Ukraine since 2022, have put long-term projects on hold and altered the agendas and activities in the Eurasia project presented in this paper. Many project participants are now refugees, either internally displaced or in Europe.

In contrast, Norway is widely recognized as one of the world’s most stable democracies (Freedom House, 2022), boasting a robust public welfare society and educational system. Democracy and citizenship have played central roles in Norwegian education throughout the last century and have recently been integrated as interdisciplinary topics across all school subjects (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017).

When establishing the Eurasia project, effective communication between the partners was all but a given, requiring extensive efforts to build a strong foundation for collaboration. While Norwegians tend to adopt an informal approach – eschewing titles and formalities – our visits to Ukraine underscored the importance of hierarchy and etiquette. This became evident in how colleagues were introduced, how students stepped aside when teachers entered the room, and in the structured, formal interactions we encountered.

National Pedagogical Dragomanov University extended warm hospitality, introducing us to faculty heads, deans, and colleagues. Meetings were accompanied by coffee and sweets, and polite attentiveness was the norm. Our Ukrainian hosts also took us to cultural events, such as classical music concerts, and treated us to traditional Ukrainian cuisine. We were even granted the privilege of using the golden elevator at Dragomanov University, typically reserved for high-ranking guests.

Despite this generous hospitality, we struggled with deeper conceptual differences related to democracy. Language barriers compounded these challenges, as English was rarely spoken, necessitating simultaneous translation. More significantly, our differing educational and political contexts shaped how democracy was understood, adding layers of risk and complexity to our communication.

## **One session – two worlds**

During the initial phase of the project, my colleague Øyvind and I conducted several introductory sessions on democracy education for our partners and their colleagues, and some lectures for their students. The first work package of the project emphasized the establishment of a common understanding of the concept of democracy, which we saw as crucial for the project's success. However, establishing this common understanding proved to be a challenging task. In the next sections, I will present two sessions held at a seminar in Kyiv, providing a snapshot of the project in its early stages in 2018.

This story takes place at a seminar at National Pedagogical Dragomanov University, our main partner. Our project coordinators at Dragomanov had invited a lot of staff. They showed great hospitality, serving us coffee and sweets, as usual, and attending a session with two presentations from our Norwegian team.

## The “excellent” academic presentation

In the first session, I prepared a presentation on different conceptual approaches to democracy. From my side, I was a little troubled by the concept of “democracy” standing out as an ideal and a repeated word in our meetings, but with very few descriptions of the nuances and different understandings of it. For the Ukrainian team, democracy education seemed to appear as a European standard to effectively be implemented. I hoped that at least some would be familiar and stir recognition as relevant by our Ukrainian colleagues.

I had therefore prepared a presentation of different conceptual understandings of democracy in education. I used PowerPoint as a visual support, with some pictures, making sure to have only a few keywords on each slide. All the sentences were translated from English to Ukrainian. The presentation followed the usual academic conference papers, with a research problem. It connected to a relevant research context, showing a systematic spectrum, and it ended with a challenging conclusion. The presentation had both common everyday definitions but also a quite high academic level (not too bad, maybe excellent, according to me). I included a good overview of the recent and updated references on the democracy academic conceptions and gave practical examples about democracy teaching. Now I hoped once and for all to start the real discussions on democracy education, to communicate.

However, my hopes were baffled. The staff looked distracted, and none of the concepts or examples seemed to hit the target. They seemed to be bored; they looked at their phones, and some of them wandered around. There was nothing to discuss at the end. I had a very strong feeling that I was speaking to a wall; I felt I missed the target.

## The crawling professor and his presentation

The next speaker, Sikunder<sup>3</sup>, a mathematics teacher from the University of South-Eastern Norway, had prepared a presentation on critical thinking as a democratic skill. I did not know him well, but my initial impression was that this person seemed gentle, polite, and reserved. However, as he began speaking, I was taken by surprise. He suddenly shifted his tone and started passionately to express his love of mathematics. He was like an explosion – bursting with energy, speaking eagerly, and waving his arms. His presenta-

tion was a stark contrast to the Ukrainian formal behaviour I had observed among the Ukrainian staff. I began to worry about how they would react to this, and then it became even more dramatic; Sikunder threw himself on the floor and started crawling. Now, I feared the Ukrainians would be offended. Next, Sikunder showed a PowerPoint slide with a picture of a chessboard. He invited the participants to tell him how many squares there were on a chessboard, starting with the obvious 64, but the number kept expanding in the dialogue with the audience. Sikunder spoke about the many examples in mathematics where “the correct answer” is not possible. He demonstrated the flexibility of mathematics and the potential to foster critical thinking and democratic values through dialogue with the students. The response took me by surprise; the Ukrainian university staff burst out with questions, comments, laughter, and smiles, clapping their hands in excitement. I was also moved, somehow touched, and in wonder; there was no doubt that Sikunder was truly communicating.

## **Part 2: Beyond “failure” and “success” in communication: Key question and methodological steps of reflection**

The Kyiv seminar has sparked many questions and loops of reflection. My initial reaction was a sense of failure in communication. However, moving beyond this intuitive judgement, I have engaged in more constructive reflection. The reflections have narrowed into a single question, which forms the research question for this paper: *What is communication in international collaboration?*

This theoretical paper draws on key methodological elements from reflective practice research (Helskog & Weiss, 2023; Helskog, 2019; Lindseth, 2021; Weiss, 2015). Reflective practice takes on a subjective, specific methodological approach. The study is not developed as an empirical study but is a *theoretical and philosophical* exploration. I employ an inductive logic, taking a starting point in the subjective life-world experiences.

Reflective practice research sees personal experience as a pivot point in knowledge development. I take the stance that knowledge and wisdom are socially and materially constituted (Parmiggiani & Mikalsen, 2013) and that practical examples bring knowledge into being as an “apparatus of bodily production” (Haraway, 1994, p. 521). However, the individual and personal are not confined to a private sphere, but they serve as essential means for recognition and invite the readers to a “community of inquiry” (Weiss,

2021, p. 242). A reflective practice approach can foster meaningful points of orientation rather than merely conveying factual knowledge (Lindseth, 2017; Weiss, 2021). This does not mean that the paper abandons its mandate to provide conclusions. Instead, reflective research seeks to develop systematized accounts of philosophical testing and exploring meaning, providing theoretical generalizations (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Methodologically, this paper follows an exploratory three-step approach, as outlined by Lindseth (2020; 2023), which can be summarized as follows:

Step 1: *Narrating a personal experience* marked by wonder, discrepancy or surprise, such as the experiences from the Kyiv seminar. The narration also includes an introductory analysis that shifts from immediate experience to an exploration of meaningful possibilities (Helskog & Weiss, 2023), asking, “What is at stake in this story?” As I wandered the streets of Kyiv, I became convinced that the two sessions were not merely about personal failure or success in delivering a presentation. Instead, I became increasingly curious and eager about the dynamics of communication with our project partners: Why was Sikunder communicating so well? Why was I not? During the one-hour seminar, I found myself part of two different audiences, navigating two distinct communication styles, where Sikunder provided an excellent example of the better.

Step 2: *Critical reflection and selecting a philosophical question*. At this stage, the goal is to change from personal reflection to relevant issues in a professional context (Husserl, 1970). As I reflected on the situation in Kyiv, I realized that the experience was not simply a case of “good” versus “bad” communication. Instead, I was eager to understand the underlying principles that shaped communication at the sessions, recognizing their significance for our future as partners in the democracy project.

Step 3: *Theoretical and philosophical reflection*. This step involves exploring aspects of experience and situating personal narratives within broader theoretical, reflective, and existential frameworks (Helskog & Weiss, 2023). After the Kyiv seminar, I felt challenged to engage with profound and philosophical questions about communication across international contexts. As a result, I reframed the research problem into a philosophical inquiry, asking, *What is communication?*

This step represents an in-depth reflection on communication in the context of the Kyiv seminar. Yet rather than providing an extensive account of communication or international collaboration, I explore selected philo-

### Part 3: Reflective paths and questions: What is communication?

## Communication as didactical facilitation or dynamics and interaction?

As an educator, my first theoretical reflection on communication involves evaluating my teaching. Of course, I question whether I used the appropriate teaching tools. From this perspective, the communication at the Kyiv seminar could be considered a didactic issue, assessing how effectively the presenters facilitated their sessions. The two sessions can be described as fundamentally different approaches to didactical facilitation. Among educators, it is widely recognized that teachers should adjust their teaching methods to the audience. Didactics embrace principles for effective teaching, including motivation, activation, concretization, variation, and individualization (Imsen, 2008, p. 242). Sikunder's presentation appeared to align with several of these principles. For instance, Sikunder used a simple and *concrete* example by displaying a picture of a chessboard. He *activated* the audience by posing a question. Sikunder demonstrated *variation* by breaking away from the conventional academic presentation style – even going so far as to crawl on the floor.

However, while any teacher should facilitate learning, evaluating the sessions solely through the lens of didactical tools might have some short-



comings. On the one hand, analysing communication from a didactical perspective might overlook some key aspects of the experience. For instance, didactics focus on the presenter's methods but fail to address the perception of communication, such as the element of surprise that the crawling professor brought to the session. Additionally, if Sikunder were to crawl again in a *future* session, it is unlikely that it would have had the same impact on the audience. There is also no guarantee that Sikunder's session would have been as effective if *I* were the one who crawled the floor. A mere focus on the didactical tools for communication might not be sufficient. The didactical perspective represents a quite technical way of describing communication, which may have less potential for generalizing about communication in the context of the Kyiv seminar. Analysing the seminar from this perspective risks adhering to a classical model of communication, where a message is delivered to a recipient. (Schramm) However, a didactical approach emphasizes the presenter's actions for facilitating learning but does not account for how it will be received or understood. Therefore, the didactical perspective may overlook the *actual dynamics* and interactions of the situation, failing to address the meaning-making that unfolded at the Kyiv seminar.

### **Reflecting on power contexts and subtexts in international collaboration**

Understanding power dynamics is crucial in an international collaboration between countries like Norway and Ukraine. When applying for funding and conducting international projects, it is essential to demonstrate a thorough understanding of the different contexts involved. As a developing democracy has been a central aspect of Ukraine's orientation towards Europe, Norway is often viewed as an example of an "ideal democracy". Therefore, understanding the communication dynamics at the Kyiv seminar requires considering the potential power imbalances between the partners (Buckner & Stein, 2019).

The Western apparatus of language and communication has been widely criticized by decolonial writers (e.g., Thiong'o, 1938; Mignolo, 2011). As an educator, an intuitive starting point for reflection might be Paolo Freire's decolonial critique of the lack of dialogue in traditional education. In brief, Freire criticizes what he calls the "banking method", where a teacher delivers knowledge to students as ready-made facts to be received,

memorized, and stored (Freire, 2005/1970, pp. 70–73). Beyond critiquing the teaching methods of the banking model, Freire highlights how both teaching practices and the content of knowledge may embody and reproduce socially oppressive structures. For Freire, a teacher using the banking method does not engage in real communication but instead creates a one-way “communiqué” (Ibid., p. 65). As an alternative, Freire proposes a dialogical process that encourages students to ask their own questions. This dialogue fosters critical consciousness (*conscientização*) and can lead to deliberation (Ibid., pp. 77, 139).

In this case, Norway holds a superior role in modelling the democracy standards that are pursued in Ukraine. I will therefore not downplay the importance of understanding the context and subtexts of communication. Yet, considering *the content* of my presentation, I did not merely deliver a “ready-made” knowledge package. Instead, I sought to present various definitions of democracy while maintaining a critical stance against singular and rigid interpretations of democracy. The content was promoted cautiously, and I intended to invite dialogue. If I failed in communicating, there might be other constraints beyond my knowledge. Although the presentation itself was not an example of *good* communication, dismissing it as non-communication might not be fully correct. Yet, my presentation could then very well be a demonstration of aggregated power for the audience; I represented a superior academic culture, telling the Ukrainians about Western democracy concepts and demonstrating academic excellence, in addition to an already dominating financial position in the project. In contrast, Sikunder’s presentation in Kyiv offered the possibility of dialogue. He invited the participants to respond to his questions, and through the responses, he asked new questions. Sikunder also encouraged steps towards critical thinking by challenging an everyday assumption that a chessboard has 64 squares. In this way, Sikunder represented a few elements of dialogical pedagogy, which worked better. However, I hold that the reason for any worse or better communication at the seminar did not lie in more or less dialogue. Freire’s contribution to the Kyiv seminar might be how he raises the awareness that knowledge always carries a subtext of power. The seminar held several potential subtexts of power. For instance, I was a representative of the project owner and managed the funding of the project, increasing the barrier to commenting and possibly adding constraints to communication. Being a Norwegian, I might also be considered a representative of Norway’s “successful” democracy in the eyes of Ukrainians. On top of that, the format followed an academic one-way presentation, with my Ukrainian

colleagues as passive listeners. According to Freire, this type of one-way teaching constitutes a mere “communicate”, implying a lack of real communication. Considering the subtexts, maybe *any* communication that day and that place – and by me as a project coordinator – was a more difficult task than I could imagine.

Although Freire outlines key steps toward dialogue and communication, his theory primarily presents communication as a matter of power embedded in social, political, and educational contexts. He emphasizes structural critique, arguing that education should emerge from the lived experiences and questions of learners within their environments. Freire’s account of communication describes power *in context*. At the Kyiv seminar, the national and local contexts make up an important frame for understanding possibilities and constraints to communication. However, the Freire account seems to focus on how possibilities and constraints to communication might be determined from *external factors and structures*, which might be too extensive for analysing the communication that took place at the Kyiv seminar. The Kyiv seminar also involves other dynamics of communication on a more fundamental and existential level: Questions that better embrace the experience of the impossibility of ever reaching a common understanding between Ukraine and Norway. In that matter, there is a need for an account of the subtexts of power.

As an alternative, I turn to deconstruction as presented by Jacques Derrida (1976/1997; 1972; 1976/1980; 1982/2007; 1994/2005). Derrida addresses power as something woven into the fabric of language and meaning itself, operating subtly through texts and questioning the foundational assumptions and conditions for communication. Employing a linguistic and philosophical approach to communication, Derrida characterizes Western academia as “logocentric”, privileging the written word. Derrida questions the hidden assumption of the written word as superior, pointing out how the written word suppresses other language systems and counts them as less accurate and less real. He states: “There is therefore a good and a bad writing: the good and natural is the divine inscription in the heart and the soul; the perverse and artful is technique, exiled in the exteriority of the body” (Derrida 1976/1997, p. 17). Many non-Western cultures put less emphasis on verbal language and rely on various expressions of pictures, gestures, and metaphors. From a Western perspective, these alternative expressions are often held as less true knowledge. Consequently, Derrida holds that the Western language may narrow our understanding and overlook important dimensions of knowing.

At first glance, Derrida's criticisms of Western logocentrism are irrelevant, as Ukraine is part of Europe and has a highly verbal culture. None of the participants at the seminar who participated could be considered "non-western" representatives. Furthermore, both presentations at the seminar can be categorized as verbal. However, the *format* of the presentations differed. I used the format of an academic verbal presentation as a demonstration. It displayed an overview of several and updated accounts of democracy education. However, I did not adopt any "banking method" to communicate the democracy concept, whereas I presented democracy as fixed content knowledge for the audience to learn. Instead, I presented a "menu" of various approaches to democracy for the audience. I had a sincere, though perhaps far-fetched, hope of communicating and establishing recognition through verbal concepts across our contexts. For that task, the toolbox still proved to be limited. Nevertheless, Sikunder's approach seemed to work better at the seminar; it took less than a minute before he crawled on the floor. In my view, communication was established through gestures and pictures, creating anything but a traditional power language.

Derrida's critique of logocentrism does not deny the necessity of verbal language as such, as he also states that "there is nothing outside the text" (Derrida, 1976, p. 158). In my presentation, I am dependent on and constituted by my available means of communication. I take the stance that every interpretation is intrinsically interwoven by words, bodies, and minds (Barad, 2007, p. 185). At the seminar, I could only try to imagine others' prior understanding and readings about democracy. Making an overview of the approaches to democracy education was, therefore, a deliberate act where I hoped for certain common interpretations. Nevertheless, a central idea of Derrida is that interpretation and signification are "never present". This can imply that I cannot convey a message that is shared and understood in that moment. Interpretation is not fixed; it is always in flux. (Derrida, 1972b, p. 18). The point of Derrida is that we can be led astray by a blind *belief* in the truthfulness of words and their power to create a common understanding. Drawing on Derrida's perspective, I recognize that my toolbox for communication was limited, and the task of ensuring a common understanding of democracy education was impossible, at least according to the settled ideals in the project description. There is a *subtext* to communication that not only creates doubts about Western academic ideals but also challenges our belief in the truth and powers of the structures of language as a means of communication.

## **What is communication? Constructive ideas from deconstruction**

So far in this reflection, I have gained insights that communication at the Kyiv seminar might be understood as more than mere teaching techniques while taking the contexts and power subtexts of communication. However, the question of what communication actually *is*, remains open.

In the following section, a more in-depth reflection is needed, where I will explore the deconstructive approach further. A deconstructive approach challenges the idea of communication as a mere “phenomenon” to be studied:

“Is it certain that there corresponds to the word communication a unique, univocal concept, a concept that can be rigorously grasped and transmitted; a communicable concept?” (Derrida, 1982/2007, p. 309).

Some critics associate Derrida and his deconstruction approach with relativism (Searle, 1993) and nihilism and rejection of objective truth and meaning (Habermas, 1987). In some respects, they might be correct. Derrida deliberately refrains from any static understanding that seeks to define fixed components of communication, stating:

“... one must first of all ask oneself whether or not the word or signifier “communication” communicates a determinate content, an identifiable meaning, or a describable value.” (Derrida, 1977/1997, p. 1)

In further reflection, I explore Derrida’s notions of communication with its limits and dynamics. By reading Derrida, I value his curiosity and how he observes communication as finely tuned dynamics rather than a stable phenomenon. The Kyiv seminar draws attention to what can be created in the moment.

The ideas of deconstruction can give the impression that there are no conceptual grounds for communication and that our efforts to create a common understanding of democracy across Ukraine and Norway are a difficult starting point. Communication is, above all, a risky enterprise. In international collaboration, communication becomes an even more complex task. Derrida (1976/1980, pp. 146–147) holds that communication can be seen as “... contextual, essentially limited, unstable, and endangered”. The outcome of a presentation is therefore beyond the speaker’s control, and neither Sikunder nor I could be fully prepared for the audience’s reactions, which will always differ from what we imagine.

According to a deconstructive approach, it is less relevant to study the calculated actions, words, and gestures of communication than to pay attention to their *effects*. Derrida says: “Deconstruction is not a neutralization; it is operative and describes effects. (Derrida, 1982/2007, p. 131). Derrida invites us to consider the acts and activities of communication beyond mere intention. He provides what I see as sensitizing concepts, drawing my attention to how communication shifts, how it is received, and how it is shaped by contexts and subtexts that challenge the intended message. In further analysis, the three notions of *différance*, iterability, and delay/play will guide the exploration of what those actions and words “do” in communication at the seminar in Kyiv.

### **From seeking a common understanding to *différance***

In international collaboration, establishing a “common understanding” is crucial. It was considered a pillar of the international project and a key component of the primary work package in the project. Therefore, arranging meetings to establish a common understanding was at the core of a successful project. Yet, one of the overarching ideas of Derrida lies in the notion of “*différance*”. The term derives from the French words “*deferment*” (delay) and “*difference*”. Derrida takes the stance that there is no such thing as a “common meaning” to be conveyed in communication. Derrida criticizes the idea that one can predict future communication by analysing prior communication patterns. “*Différance*” does not denote differences between things and empirical phenomena, but he rather wants to draw attention to how meaning cannot be carried unchanged from one context to another. According to Derrida, a “core” meaning cannot exist in communication. “*Le thème de la différence est incompatible v le motif statique, synchronique, taxinomique, anhistorique, etc., du concept de structure.*” (Derrida, 1972, p. 39). Derrida refrains from settling on identifying assets or static classifications of communication. This means, for instance, that it might be naïve to believe that there is a structure for communication across contexts.

Considering my experience of failure in Kyiv, I find the notion of *différance* to be relieving. It is not a given that it would be possible to create a common understanding. A common understanding cannot be based on assumed similarities between the contexts for democracy education in Norway and Ukraine. Although I had the experience that Sikunder’s presentation communicated better than mine at the seminar. Yet, Derrida un-

derlines that one cannot analyse communication patterns in an instrumental way to predict or improve future communication. As a consequence, it is not meaningful to analyse the technical details of Sikunder's or my presentation forms. Neither the chessboard nor crawling are all-encompassing assets for securing a common understanding that works at any time and in all contexts. I also acknowledge that my academic presentation format can be useful in several other international settings. With Derrida, I pose the question if we ever were *supposed to* reach a common understanding of the concept of democracy in Kyiv. Instead of holding on to a far-fetched hope of promoting a common understanding through academic standards at the seminar, the awareness of difference can maybe create other insights about the dynamics of communication.

Derrida introduces the concept of *différance*, an overarching idea in communication. I have selected three key dynamics of *différance*: interruption/delay, iterability, and play. These concepts can make up interesting lenses for a further reflection on communication at the Kyiv seminar.

### **From smooth communication to interruption and delay**

One does not have to attend the Kyiv seminar to realize that communication is anything but a neat, linear process from sender to receiver. In that respect, both my traditional presentation and Sikunder's untraditional presentation illustrate this point quite well. Neither of us communicated in ways that could be characterized as "neat", either in format or in the effects their messages had on the audience. Derrida introduces a temporal understanding of communication through the terms "interruption" and "delay".

The first temporal condition of communication can be described as a dynamic of *interruption*. Interruption does not mean the act of one person cutting off another in a conversation. Derrida holds that "... if there was a definition of *différance*, it would be precisely the limit, the interruption" (Derrida, 1972, p. 55, own translation). A message cannot be communicated as "one package" but is always *interrupted* in the act of communication. Through the concept of interruption, Derrida introduces a temporal dimension, as if he urges us to pause and become aware of the moments within a communicative transaction. In doing so, Derrida challenges communication theories that focus on the linear movement of a message, as well as those that analyse the constraints and possibilities for communication. The idea

of linear movement is deferred; even before a message reaches its recipient, it is already interrupted.

For Derrida, communication can be understood as a form of absence, meaning that it does not exist as a fully formed state. Derrida (1972, p. 315) explains about the written text:

*“The absence of the sender, the receiver, the referent of the contextual conditions that could fix the meaning of a sign is not an accident but the very structure of writing. The mark carries within itself the structure of an absence that is the condition of its functioning.”*

Derrida’s description of absence does not imply that communication lacks meaning. On the contrary, communication is rather saturated with meaning, though as a means between the sender and the receiver as isolated actors.

At the Kyiv seminar, Sikunder and I attempted to reinforce the meaning of a message by using words, presentation tools, and gestures to reinforce our messages. Derrida argues that these are not necessarily clarifying means of a message. Instead, they can interrupt initial thoughts or agendas between the parties and initiate interactions we cannot predict. The two sessions at the Kyiv seminar are two different examples of interruption: My presentation was correct and quite “excellent” in a Western academic sense. And still, while presenting at the seminar, the intentions fell apart and created distance and even defensiveness among the audience. The concepts and meanings did not function as stable and transmissible; Sikunder’s session represented an interruption of other premises: He broke the barriers between the Norwegian and the Ukrainian participants by taking on other forms of language, creating surprise and amazement among the academics. At the Kyiv seminar, I see the interruption and the surprise as more than a calculated tactic from Sikunder’s side. The interruption could very well represent a rupture and estrangement rather than engagement. In this situation, however, this interruption created an open-ended moment where the audience was invited to participate.

Then, the next question is what happens when the audience is involved. However, at the Kyiv seminar, Sikunder not only surprised the audience. The interruption also paves the way for something more. According to Derrida, meaning is never fully present and self-contained. Derrida holds that “truth must hold the possibility of misunderstanding into account” (1976/1980, pp. 146–147). Every form of communication involves a *delay*. This delay implies that a message takes loops, as the participants connect words and signs to multiple experiences in time and space. Meaning is de-



ferred in time and space, dependent on context, participants, experiences, and agencies. Words like “democracy” can by no means bear a direct reference to a specific meaning for anyone in the audience. Each participant makes their own associations to it, connecting democracy to experience, times, and places where a concept like democracy makes sense.

### **Iterability: From the intended message to play**

The next question is: Is it even possible to communicate a message to an audience if it is always interrupted and delayed? At the Kyiv seminar, I was fully aware of many of the challenges of obtaining a common understanding of democracy across Ukraine and Norway. My best strategy was to establish common concepts by referring to academic papers and theories. I sincerely hoped that the references to the theoretical papers would create a sense of repetition if they recognized the democracy concepts I presented, thus easing further communication about democracy. However, although my academic presentation seemed to follow an academic and seemingly “contextless” script, it caused estrangement rather than recognition. Perhaps it also created distance, reinforced by the academic format as an authoritative and exclusive discourse.

Derrida explores the conditions for communication in written papers. A common assumption about written text is that making a message “contextless” allows it to be repeated and spread across contexts. By introducing the terms “iterability”, “repetition”, Derrida challenges the idea that academic texts are contextless.

“What is remarkable about writing – as about all signs – is that it can function even in the absence of the sender, receiver, and referent. This is possible only because the mark is iterable, repeatable in different contexts, even if those contexts radically transform its meaning.” (*Margins of Philosophy*, 1982/2007, p. 315)

Derrida describes the path where a written text moves from reader to reader and draws attention to two dynamics of iterability: repetition and transformation. First, the written text provides a *repetition*.

However, as a message is repeated, the situation, the context, and all participants act upon the message in various ways. The moment a message is presented, it also comes with huge risks: the participants interpret, engage, ignore, and involve their former experience, and use their imagination. The message becomes *transformed* through the context and its re-

ception. To Derrida, meaning is never fixed, only a chain of differences and reconstructions.

According to Derrida, this transformation is not a particular threat to the original repetition but should be regarded as *a play*. “Différance is the play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the spacing by means of which elements are related to each other”. (Derrida 1982/2007, p. 21). Consequently, communication is less a calculated action and more a *creative activity*.

Deconstructivism underlines this play in communication. In the foreword to Derrida’s work, Spivak holds that “[ . . . Knowledge is not a systematic tracking down of a truth that is hidden but may be found. It is rather the field of free play, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions in the closure of a finite ensemble.” (Spivak in Derrida, 1976/1980, p. xix). One could say that Derrida’s account of communication bears on elements from a “whispering game”, where the intended meaning is displaced by each repetition, an object to a freeplay and transformation, with an unpredictable outcome.

Repetition and play are also central notions for reflecting on Sikunder’s presentation. I would say that Sikunder provided repetition and recognition, as he drew on well-known concepts with his chessboard and asked simple questions about the number of squares on the board – an easy question to answer. The audience could feel at home with his questions, despite his untraditional behaviour.

However, it is also likely to think about Sikunder’s talk as a form of play. From the very beginning, his message appeared somewhat chaotic; he spoke hastily and with great enthusiasm. He crawled, moved around, presented an image of a chessboard, and asked questions. Like me, Sikunder spoke in English and required translation into Ukrainian. Nothing seemed neatly structured. At first glance, his speech seemed to lack the conciseness and clarity expected in an academic setting.

Through the reflection on communication, we can observe how the sessions opened and constrained communication. The sessions had potential for both. Yet, instead of striving to establish any common understanding based on similarities, I believe Sikunder succeeded in embracing differences. What he had at hand was the opportunity to play with expectations, both in relation to the concept of democracy and the norms of an academic presentation. Rather than making a message tidy and comprehensible, I believe he led the audience to grasp the idea of democracy as an unfinished project – and an agora, a meeting place where there is room for difference.

A crucial element in reflecting on communication is not to observe repetition as a pedagogical or structural manoeuvre, but rather to draw attention to the transformation of communication and the dynamics that are created. Reflecting beyond Derrida, I seek what lies beyond the presentation and the dramaturgy and mess of signs, gestures, words, and crawling. Sikunder brought a high-risk project into the room, where seemingly anything could happen. It was a transformative moment. My immediate thought is that Sikunder created an open *space of possibilities* for the audience. In that manner, the space of possibility can be called a “speech act” (Butler, 1997, p. 3). Perhaps the space at the Kiev seminar can be described as a sense of capability, enabling the participants to envision how to engage with democracy and critical thinking in their own classrooms. Thus, Sikunder might have struck a nerve – namely, a hope for developing democracy in education and more practically supporting them in their teaching tasks.

#### **Part 4: The quest for meaningful connections**

In this chapter, I present the story of two presentations held at a seminar in Kyiv by a Norwegian team for colleagues in a Eurasia project focused on developing democracy education in Ukraine and Norway. Since the Kyiv seminar was one of the project’s first activities, it was a primary goal to establish common ground and (hopefully) ensure good alignment of key objectives and concepts. In short, everything rose and fell on good communication.

Most project funders, coordinators, and university managers engaged in international collaboration find that communication is at the core of a project’s success. However, as the two sessions at the Kyiv seminar demonstrated, this communication is anything but a quick fix. While my own traditional academic presentation appeared to fall flat, Sikunder’s unconventional approach resonated with the audience, despite a university setting that usually values tradition and formalities. This contrast led beyond an initial, intuitive judgement of my own presentation as a mere “failure” and stirred my curiosity to explore communication in international collaboration.

In this paper, I took a starting point in seeing communication as more of a settled phenomenon and a simple transmission process of messages between a sender and a receiver. I also move beyond the analysis of communication as matters of mere teaching techniques. My reflective process fol-

lowed the steps suggested in reflective practice research (Helskog & Weiss, 2023), followed by the selection of one fundamental philosophical question: *What is communication in international collaboration?* My experiences at the Kyiv seminar make up a frame for an exploratory reflection on communication. Leaving the intuitive reactions behind, I briefly consult didactical theory before I move into communication as a philosophical question. I have asked a series of questions – each exploring the communication at the Kiev seminar that unfolds angles and tensions that add to the former. Through this exploratory reflection, certain trajectories have emerged, as illustrated in Figure 1 and listed below:

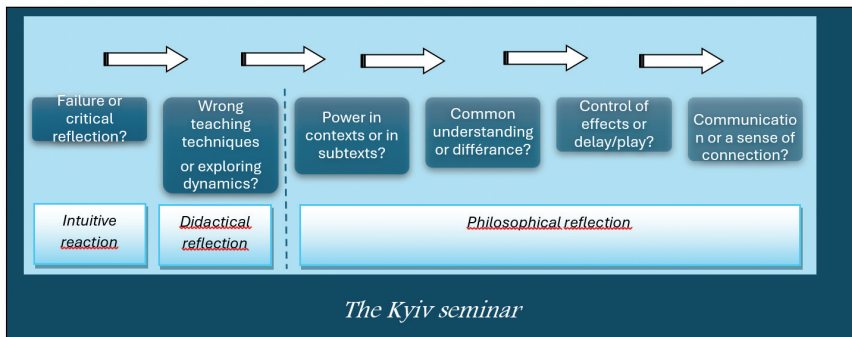


Figure 1: Overview of the reflection process of communication.

1. Intuitive reaction: From failure and success towards critical reflection
2. Didactical reflection: From wrong techniques to exploring dynamics
3. Philosophical reflection:
  - a. From power in context to power in-text.
  - b. From seeking a common understanding to embracing difference
  - c. From smooth means of communication to interruption and delay
  - d. From communication as control and intention to communication as play

Through this reflection process, some overall insights have unfolded. Intuitively, I would prefer streamlined communication processes, where the partners gradually can develop a common understanding, avoiding the energy-demanding task of clarifying the basics of international collaboration. Still, we are not handling similarities; instead, we are called to deal with difference. Difference represents a foundational condition for communication in international collaboration, implying the demand to accept

differences and come to peace with difference. However, they also bring a sense of moral relief and humility toward difference. I understand the project partners and our communication as inherently incomplete and in change, and perhaps that is ok. International collaboration challenges, more than any other job task, to acknowledging the incomplete, the uncertain, and the acceptance moments when understanding remains just beyond reach.

Yet, even as we reflect on difference as a basic condition for communication, there is one central issue not yet addressed by deconstruction or any other account in this paper. It remains a mystery and a puzzle to be forwarded: What about the sense of feeling *connected* in international collaboration? What is this connection about?

I speak about *alignment*: the moments of finding ways to work together, where the project participants find each other and align toward each other across different contexts. It is a connection due to the alignment of tasks and solutions, where the teams become productive, despite differences, and in times of impossible obstacles, such as pandemics and war.

I speak about communication as *attunements*: the moments where difference and complexity are silenced for a short while. The sudden moments where the group becomes still and at peace, in the midst of the mess of working the systems and delivering results. The moments where you look at each other, and there is an instant connection, where you are finely attuned, and nobody wants to ruin the moment by speaking.

I speak about communication as a *communion*: From these moments, how do we become a unified “we”, a communion? Perhaps there is a feeling that it is “us against the rest”, and a union that eventually opens the gates for a deeper understanding of each other and the tasks the project is supposed to deliver. This sense of communion transcends mere cooperation, involving care, trust, and empathy.

These moments, however ephemeral, seem to resist analysis. They do not fit neatly into theories of communication, yet they matter deeply. Donna Haraway (1991) reminds us that “we’re living in a world of connections – and it matters which ones get made and unmade.”

As I conclude this reflection, I do not offer final answers. Instead, I invite further exploration of the conditions, possibilities, and mysteries of communication. A core lesson, for me as well as for project funders and universities, is that international collaboration involves more than academic knowledge and qualifications. More than anything, the ability to build reflective foundations of sensitivity, engagement, and the urge for wisdom will be decisive for the future of building international collaboration.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Ingrid R. Christensen is a professor in pedagogy and specializes in professional learning and ethics. Christensen has experience in teaching and supervision across all levels in pedagogy, research methodology, special needs education, and the integration of technology in education. She has led and developed research and development projects in education, including in Palestine and Ukraine. She is currently working on the development of European border collaboration at the Norwegian Police University College.
- <sup>2</sup> The 5-year project, spanning from 2017 to 2022, received funding from the Directorate for Higher Education and Internationalization in Norway (HK-Dir).
- <sup>3</sup> The presenter's first name is published with his acceptance.

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## CHAPTER 4: PHILOSOPHISING – A WAY TOWARDS SAFE SPACE

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### **Abstract**

*For conducting the Reflective Practice Research, the departure point is the concrete reflection that highlights the first international collaboration, based on philosophical practice, and further experience of implementing the philosophical dialogue as a method of teaching at the pedagogical university in Ukraine. The practical reflection also represents the effect of international collaboration on the author's personal life during the war-related crisis. The part of critical reflection allows deepening into the analysis of experience and defining the core theme – the role of philosophical dialogue in creating a safe space during the time in Ukraine. The theoretical reflection investigates the definitions of 'safe space'. The ethic of care is considered a mechanism that fosters the sense of safety, responsibility, and respect for others' feelings and encourages acting to protect others. The reflective practice proves that both safety and care can manifest in the process of dialogical interaction that does not necessarily exclude the controversial topics and provides room for exploring a person's beliefs, needs, and boundaries.*

### **Keywords:**

philosophical dialogue, international experience, reflective cycle, safe space, times of uncertainty, caring relationships, ethic of care.

### **Introduction**

Internationalization of education has a variety of meanings, being dependent on the levels of its implementation – political, sectoral, or institutional. Analysing the concepts of internationalization, I figured out one area of internationalization that is revealed in this research. According to Feich-

ler (2004), internationalization in higher education should imply border-crossing communication and discourse. Learning and research within the international settings gain a creative manner (one's own conceptual framework is tackled by disclosing new theories, methodologies, and approaches that are different from the home culture and incite one to reflect on the practices, broaden the horizon, and develop more complex perspectives).

This chapter explores one dimension of internationalization that emerged through my research: the role of philosophical dialogue in teacher education. My collaboration with researchers from Norway and Palestine significantly influenced my professional trajectory, particularly in implementing philosophical dialogue as a teaching approach in pre-service teacher training. Through reflective practice research, I examine philosophising both as a pedagogical approach in teacher education courses and as a transformative practice that shaped my personal and professional development.

The significance of this research lies in its emphasis on the transformative power of international collaboration. Philosophical dialogue is used as a method to foster meaningful intercultural exchange and to create a safe space in education – particularly in times of crisis – offering valuable insights into how education can be reimagined to promote deeper reflection, understanding, and growth.

## Concrete reflection

For conducting reflective practice research on philosophising in my teaching practice, I start with describing the first encounter with philosophical dialogue. In 2018, the teaching staff of Donbas State Pedagogical University participated in the international project “Enhancing Democracy Culture in Norway, Ukraine, and Palestine”. The aim of the project was to support a broad and dynamic understanding of democracy development in school. Donbas State Pedagogical University is located in the east of Ukraine, next to the Russian border, where the Joint Forces Operation has been taking place since 2014.

The participation in this project was crucial for me and other teacher trainers, as partnership with colleagues from Norway and Palestine at that time added to our hopefulness and provided valuable insights on how to improve the teaching methods for communicating an idea of the diversity of the society, equal dignity, and equality and how to improve the social

cohesion within the classroom in the region where military conflict was palpable.

During the workshop week in 2018, I had an opportunity to work with Guro Hansen Helskog, who is a trainer in implementing the dialogue approach in teaching and learning activities at teaching training universities. We worked as a team where representatives from different regions of Ukraine were included. We started with the usual circle of introduction by using a method where we had to choose one card that the trainer offered to define at what point in life each of us was. The card I chose showed a spiral stairway. To be honest, I don't remember clearly how I interpreted it. I think it was something about professional development, as it was a group of colleagues from higher education institutions, and we mainly discussed the professional issues. It was my first trial of philosophical practice, and it was not very smooth since I got the understanding of the true essence of philosophical dialogue a bit later. However, my reflection after the workshops included the ideas that philosophical dialogue is open to the content and can be incorporated in the teaching of a wide range of courses, philosophising is a lifestyle to teach to students, and it gives content and tools for building difficult conversations to search for wisdom. Democracy in philosophising is achieved through the inclusion and active engagement of all participants, based on the generally accepted ethical norms and rules.

At the next stage of project implementation, I had some trials of using the philosophical practice while teaching the course on country study of English-speaking countries in primary school teachers' training. I considered this course to be relevant, as it dealt with the issues of cultural diversity and the necessity to build cultural dialogue among representatives of different ethnicities. I should accept that practice was not smooth, and I faced a number of challenges, among them: lack of knowledge and skills on how to facilitate dialogues, fear of losing control in the course of dialogue, and a weak sense of self-efficacy as dialogues sometimes grew into usual educational discussions and even into conflict situations or verbal confrontations. After that first test, I stopped practising philosophical dialogue in my teaching.

However, some positive changes began as a result of participating in this project, giving the internationalization of education at Donbas State Pedagogical University more practical features. I became aware that the university needed to further strengthen its focus on democratization and expand its internationalization efforts. In response, a team of university researchers, including myself, developed a project proposal for a Jean Monnet

Module under the Erasmus+ programme, which was successfully approved. This led to the implementation of the project “Ukraine – EU: Intercultural Communication in Education” and the introduction of the course “Intercultural Communication Studies” for university students. Since intercultural learning addresses key issues such as culture, identity, diversity, inclusion, and justice, the importance of engaging students in dialogical interaction became evident. It was also crucial to create a welcoming environment where students could freely express their opinions and share personal experiences, especially given that philosophising as a learning activity was not a typical part of traditional teaching methods.

Throughout the course, students did a number of activities – listening to stories about diversity and social justice issues that were connected to the risk of disclosure of their identity. Moreover, the activities in intercultural learning created some situations when students should deal with conflicts, behaving with respect and humanity. At that moment, when teaching, I was mystified about how to create the space that would include all the participants while giving them the sense of safety and confidence. So, I turned to studying the issue of safe space and ways of creating it within the classroom. I was determined to return to using philosophical dialogue the following year while studying the same course.

The start of the course coincided with the introduction of quarantine due to the COVID-19 pandemic. And the issue of physical and social isolation and safety became especially relevant. So, I tried again to use the method of philosophical dialogue to discuss not only the topics of interculturality but also the issue of safety. “What does ‘safe space’ mean for each of us?” appeared to be a philosophical question itself. I tried to establish a dialogical interaction among students to support their hopefulness in times of despair. These dialogues aimed to reflect on the vulnerability of people in an increasingly stressful world and get a deeper understanding that the notion of safety is differently interpreted by people and that it should be taken into account in trials to create one’s personal safe space.

These dialogues were also challenged by several factors. First, they were organised entirely at a distance, which added some stress to the interaction process. Some students preferred to keep their cameras off, and in the context of a safe space, this choice could be seen as their way of creating personal comfort. Additionally, many students were focused on their own well-being and the challenges of managing daily life, which led to a lack of engagement. Through this, they didn’t pay attention either to what the other said or to the fact that some students stayed “invisible”.

The process of philosophising stopped after the first phase – humanistic-pedagogical, described by Helskog (2017), as much of the dialogue time was spent establishing an atmosphere of dialogical democracy. This involved setting overarching communication norms and encouraging students to adopt a reflective approach to the discussed topics. The facilitation of these dialogues was complicated by the absence of physical presence in online learning. The online learning environment is inherently less authentic than traditional classroom settings (Croft, Dalton, & Grant, 2010), making it difficult to foster engagement. Only a few students actively participated in discussions, though their written reflections later demonstrated that the topic of safety was personally meaningful and relevant to them. However, facilitating dialogue in a synchronous online setting posed another challenge: it was nearly impossible to determine whether students truly grasped the premise and content of the dialogues or whether they received adequate support from the teacher to gain valuable insights and move toward deeper understanding.

After that second trial to incorporate philosophising in my teaching practice, I decided again to return to it when the course in intercultural learning should be taught the following year. Unfortunately, the start of the teaching coincided with the start of the full-scale war of Russia against Ukraine, which was followed by the relocation of students and teaching staff. We faced new problems, such as the deepening of social isolation, the increasing number of dangers, separation from family and friends, and adaptations to new cultural and language conditions for students who moved abroad. So, the issue of safety received a new meaning for the students; it has been transformed under the crisis conditions in times of war-related insecurity.

The start of the war affected me both professionally and personally. Before the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022, I used philosophical dialogue only for professional purposes. But this date became the turning point – philosophical dialogue impacted my personal transformations, as the issue of safe space became extremely meaningful and relevant for me.

After reflecting on the significance of philosophical dialogue in the context of my professional development, I would like to add a short paragraph about its role in my personal transformation and guiding me to a safe place in the most dangerous and stressful time in my life, a period that was full of despair and hopelessness. I present it as a one-week timeline, as I remember that period of the very beginning of the war in great detail.

During the first week of the war (February 24 – March 1, 2022), like millions of Ukrainians, I was in a state of complete uncertainty, feeling lost and not knowing what to do. The main occupations were monitoring the news and waiting for when that nightmare would finish. So, scrolling through the tapes of Facebook, hoping to find encouraging news, I came across an announcement of Guro Helskog, who invited people to participate in a philosophising session, and I registered for it. The session took place on Sunday evening, March 6, 2022. It was a starting point for this timeline. I prefer not to describe the details of my personal transformations and only show the speed of events and results. However, I should mention that during that session, a brief dialogue with international colleagues ignited a newfound inspiration within me, affirming my ability to cultivate a sense of safety amidst the chaos of war.

Sunday, March 6, 2022 – meeting with colleagues from different countries to philosophise about the pursuit of peace; agreed to meet in a week to continue practicing.

Monday, March 7, 2022 – looking for opportunities for Ukrainian scholars and finding a proposal for the fellowship “Ukrainian Scholars at Risk” at the University of Graz (Austria). The deadline is on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March.

Tuesday, March 8, 2022 – preparing the documents required and submitting the application.

Friday, March 11, 2022 – getting the positive result of the application process.

Sunday, March 13, 2022 – leaving for Graz (Austria).

When Professor Guro Helskog wrote to me to ask if I was doing well and could join the session that we had agreed on a week before, I was already on the train going to Austria, trying to create a safe space for me and my family. To be honest, I gained the awareness of these transformations, both personal and professional, a bit later, approximately in September 2022, when a new academic year started, and I went on working with students in the Ukrainian university and trying to implement philosophical dialogue in my courses, in parallel creating a safe space for them and together with them. And now I would like to combine these two parts of my experience and investigate them in this chapter.

## Critical reflection

In the urgent need to support students' resilience and hopefulness in times of war crisis, the safety of students is at stake. The main question was how I could build a safe space for students in the educational process while being physically distant. Following up on the previous experience of implementing philosophical dialogue, discussions, and reflections on the issue of safe space in education, I depicted a cyclic nature of my practice that included abandoning the attempts to achieve the "ideal space" and returning to them, looking at the previous experience from different angles.

I use Gibbs' reflective cycle, which allowed me to focus on the challenging experience and highlight the insights into new opportunities. Gibb's (1988) model of the reflective cycle includes six stages that guide the process of reflection and focuses on learning from reflection: 1) describing the situation without any conclusions; 2) revealing reactions and feelings from experience; 3) evaluation of the situation; 4) analysing the situation and the insights drawn from it; 5) making conclusions; 6) building an action plan for future activities.

Overall, in my experience, I can single out two full cycles and one cycle that is now in progress. The first cycle was realised between 2018 and 2020, and its stages proceeded as follows:

1. Participation in the project on democracy education and development of the exercises for the teacher education course.
2. Feeling of enlightenment from the new experience and disappointment because of some failures while engaging students in the dialogical interaction.
3. The advantage of the situation was that the students became more aware of the fact that they could freely express their opinion and be heard; the main disadvantage was the turning of the philosophical dialogue into a traditional educational discussion with arguments.
4. The need to add a sense of safety for students.
5. The urgency of the broader representation of democracy approach, focusing on the feeling of safety.
6. Developing the application in European Studies that focuses on the democratic approach to education and fosters students' global competence.

This circle of critical analysis of my first trial marked the professional transformations. Adapting the international experience expanded the pro-



fessional horizons and necessitated taking further actions in the direction of improvement and empowering the students.

The next cycle started after getting funding for the project to teach the course of European Studies between 2020 and 2022:

1. Teaching the course of intercultural communication studies through incorporating philosophical dialogue.
2. Feeling enthusiastic about participating in the project relevant to the Ukrainian system of teacher education and having challenges of online interaction.
3. The advantage is that the topic of safety becomes meaningful for students and motivates them to actively participate in the discussion of safety; the disadvantage is the impossibility of having a physical interaction.
4. Getting a new experience of facilitating the dialogues through digital media and understanding different perspectives of safety in an educational context.
5. Need to explore the students' perception of safety in emergency situations and under the conditions of physical and social isolation.
6. Getting interested in the concept of safety and exploring its meaning in both physical and virtual environments.

The second cycle also closed at the stage of grasping the necessity to develop professionally and make further improvements to the teaching and learning process in times of uncertainties and threats to physical and emotional well-being.

The third cycle of the critical reflective analysis represents the ongoing process that has not been completed yet. This cycle also raises personal questions, as the issue of creating a safe space is now self-relevant and requires further exploration.

Based on the critical analysis of the previous situation, current crisis conditions in education, and experience of interaction with students from a Ukrainian university, I formulated additional research questions: How is the concept of safe space approached in the literature? How could the concept of safety be generated in the crisis reality? What is the role of philosophical dialogue in creating a safe space during wartime in Ukraine?

## Theoretical reflection

How is the concept of safe space approached in the literature?

The concept of safety has evolved significantly, expanding beyond its traditional definition of mere protection from harm. Contemporary understandings view safety as both a state of security and a dynamic process influenced by political, economic, social, and psychological factors. The concept of safety is also in line with Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Sheng & Fauzi, 2022), as the second most important human need after physiological needs, such as hunger, thirst, and fatigue, have been satisfied. Moreover, safety encompasses both objective protection and subjective perception; the latter means the importance of feeling secure for individuals. This complexity has resulted in various classifications of safety, including categories of social, cultural, economic, and informational safety. In times of crisis, safety extends beyond merely physical protection and implies preserving psychological resilience, human rights, and collective identity.

Education plays a crucial role in shaping awareness, attitudes, and behaviours related to safety, making it a foundational aspect of fostering stability in uncertain times. Education for safety integrates ethical values such as responsibility, dignity, and tolerance to develop socially aware citizens. A strong sense of security within a community contributes to broader social stability and peace, reinforcing the idea that those who feel safe actively participate in maintaining and cultivating security (Wysokińska-Senkus, 2020). In the context of crisis and war, educational spaces should become sites of both protection and empowerment, offering students a sense of stability and agency. These insights provide a critical foundation for analysing how educational institutions can construct and sustain safe spaces amid crisis conditions, particularly through practices that encourage critical thinking, emotional resilience, and collective reflection.

In the part of theoretical reflection, I turned to literature analysing the concept of safe space in times of crisis that is complicated by physical distancing and the establishment of student-teacher interaction that takes place exclusively in a digital environment. Considering different definitions of "safe space", we can outline how it's approached in the literature.

The traditional background of the concept of safe space derives from a characteristic of physical safety (originally for women and LGBTQ representatives). Adopted in higher education, it meant the protection of the marginalised groups of students from discrimination, harassment, hatred, and other threats.

Exploring the examples of safe spaces in higher education settings, the safe space was implemented in the context of intercultural education. We should say that because schools are multicultural, it is necessary to ap-

proach the educational process as a safe space for diverse groups to express their identity of individual identity and to minimise the negative effect of disclosure of students' identity, especially those who are in the margins.

The notion of “safe space” is very ambiguous and widely discussed in educational contexts. The works of Boostrom (1998), Gayle, Cortez, and Preiss (2013), Callan (2016), and Fast (2018) are helpful in defining the notion of safe space. Boostrom (1998) put forth a metaphoric analysis of safe space and possible implications of safe space. Four different views of safe space arise from the metaphoric analysis: 1) physical isolation; 2) both physical and psychic isolation; 3) an uncomfortable environment where difficult dialogues take place; 4) freedom to express oneself, being a creator of safe space.

The first element of the safe space includes being a physically safe environment where everybody feels comfortable and protected, even through physical isolation.

The second aspect of the safe space is a built-in protection. It emphasises that learning includes risks and even the pain of giving up a former condition for getting a new way of seeing things. The learning takes place in safe space talks, and students decide for themselves if they want to participate in the learning interaction. For teachers, it's essential that all the students participate in the interaction of the learning process. However, to feel safe for students means to have the freedom not to participate. According to Helskog (2019), the refusal to be engaged in the dialogue is a way of non-participation that occurs in the learning process. Describing the examples of her own philosophical practice as a facilitator, she experienced a situation where one boy preferred to hide under his hood and not participate yet still wanted to retain her Dialogos books that she distributed among students for dialogical sessions and collected at the end. After reflecting on this example, she tried to establish a dialogue session with colleagues at the philosophical practice conference to find the answer to the question, “What does non-participation in philosophical dialogue mean?” (Helskog, 2019, p. 131). The answers that the philosophical practitioner comes up with in her study align with the concept of safe space presented by Boostrom (1998). If students prefer not to contribute verbally to the open exchange of experiences and opinions, they can be engaged in an inner dialogue with themselves and the subject matter. To begin speaking openly, they need to first reflect on their own thoughts and feelings and make sure that the space provides them with safety (Zembylas, 2015).

The third element of the safe space is a more complicated issue, as it implies that “safe space” is not always a synonym for the word “comfort”. And the way to comfort is always fraught with stress. The most stressful thing is to be invisible to others, not physically but socially. Expressing opinions that sometimes are confrontational, as well as seeking sense-making, brings people together in the community. Boostrom (1998) says that showing differences, using their voices, and playing their roles in the communities are the true essence of a safe space.

In Boostrom’s (1998) research, we can find the evidence that safe space has the common features of dialogical interaction and even philosophising, as this concept originates from Plato’s educational traditions, emphasising that learning includes risks and the pain of giving up former conditions for getting a new way of seeing things. Boostrom (1998) cited the words of Plato’s slave Meno, who said that in learning, there is no safe space to hide when Socrates starts asking questions. However, taking into account the complexity of the situation caused by the war, dialogical interaction in education cannot be an additional factor for risk and stress for students, so dialogues should be the source of hopefulness and resilience for students. Therefore, a more detailed analysis of the concept of safe space is needed.

Safe space is crucial for conducting difficult dialogues and emotional exchanges. An academic safe space is an inclusive environment that provides students with opportunities for interpersonal and intrapersonal development. This kind of space implies dialogue, inclusion, and respect. Focusing on the implementation of difficult dialogues, Gayle, Cortez, & Preiss (2013) describe the practice of creating safe spaces that include:

- sharing ethical guidelines for creating a safe space and developing communication rules;
- discussing the experience of participating in difficult dialogues;
- highlighting students’ needs and expressing their views about the efficacy of safe space.

These findings suggest that safety in educational settings is achieved through dialogical interaction, and, on the contrary, to be actively involved in the dialogue, students should feel safe. The academic discussions revolve around the issue of difficult dialogues and their compliance with the concept of safe space. When students are at risk of meeting opposing opinions and experience contradictions, the focus of the discussion is shifted towards the concept of brave space. Arao & Clemens (2013) suggest this alternative to safe space as courageous conversations about race and racism to encourage students to be involved in discussions about diversity and social injustices.

tice. They criticise the safe space for being a kind of illusion, emphasising the need for courage to position students by themselves in the dialogues for accomplishing the learning goals. Brave space is more congruent with our understanding of privilege, oppression, and the challenges inherent in dialogue about these issues in socioculturally diverse groups.

Iversen (2018) suggests replacing the concept of safe space with community of disagreement, revealing the idea that the classroom is ‘a group with identity claims’, consisting of people with different opinions who find themselves engaged in a common process to solve shared problems or challenges (Iversen, 2018). In this community, students are intellectually challenged, where they try out different perspectives and positions, where they dare to see things in new ways, and where they possibly may be affected and transformed by intellectually demanding learning processes.

The controversy between the concept of safe space and brave space can be explained from the point of view of Callan (2016) on such spaces. The researcher distinguishes between intellectual safety and dignity safety. Dignity safe space cannot be questioned, as dignity safety is a social condition that should be created for those who occupy public roles in a democratic society. To be dignified in a given social environment is to be free of any reasonable anxiety that others will treat one as having an inferior social rank to theirs. Callan (2016) suggests strengthening dignity and safety through the necessity to encourage civility.

The common thing for the concept of safe space and alternative concepts is that they have a dialogical nature in an educational context and take place in classroom interaction.

Several defensive statements for using the concept “safe space” instead of alternative terms can be presented. First, the current life-threatening situation changes the approaches to teaching and learning. Traditionally, in Ukraine, the main focus is on the didactic and subject-specific needs. However, the unprecedented circumstances demand approaches that go beyond the subject focus and actualise the relationality of education. Student-teacher and student-student relationships are more valuable for strengthening the feeling of safety. Second, for dialogical interaction in educational settings, the feeling of safety is prior to the feeling of bravery. The space should foster students’ safety as a subjective perception, and only then they can be ready to engage in the discussion of topics that require them to be brave to participate in authentic communication. According to the humanistic-pedagogical approach to arranging the dialogical interaction, the teacher (facilitator) invests a lot of time in the humanistic issues and

reminding the ethical norms and setting the rules for fostering the transformation of students' attitude to dialogical interaction, such as tolerance, respect, and openness to each other in the dialogue, and after that they can proceed to the next level that implies more risks as it is more focused on the content that is involved in the dialogue.

Gayle, Cortez, & Preiss (2013) prove that participation in difficult dialogues maintains students' open-mindedness to understand the positions of others. The practice of creating a safe space should start with sharing ethical guidelines and developing communication rules. The discussion of the ethical guidelines for dialogical interaction takes place at the beginning of the course, and all the students are involved in the process of their setting, starting with introducing themselves and their communication style. They discuss the ways to ensure that all voices in the classroom are heard and nobody is left socially invisible. Students agree on five or six ethical rules that contribute to building a safe space and reconsider the communication rules.

Discussing the ethical rules is an important element of a safe space, as they should be appropriate in a living way, not imposed on them. Otherwise, they become violent toward students and cause harm, which does not correspond to the understanding of safety in a learning environment.

When students are prepared for the interaction and feel confident and safe, they can put the content to the fore. They do not need to hide their opinions or beliefs and can freely participate in the discussion of controversial topics (Helskog, 2017). People cannot feel confident and secure in an unsafe environment or in an unsafe situation. In the conceptual chain of these feelings, safety precedes confidence, comfort, bravery, and well-being (Avni-Babad, 2011).

## **Defining safe space under the crisis conditions**

However, the boundaries of the safe space go beyond a "risk discourse" of race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Safety is considered as an umbrella term for many types of issues or problems that educational institutions address to ensure the overall wellness of educational agents (Mibuta, 2021). So, the definition of "safe space" depends on the threats that arise in life. There are as many safe spaces as there are threats to the things that human beings can care about. The controversy between the safe space and education can be resolved by greater clarity about what kind of safety stu-

dents might need. In difficult life conditions for students, teachers balance between students' wellbeing, which also implies the feeling of safety, and preserving the high quality of education. A feeling of safety is necessary for students' well-being and comfort; it preserves their ability to function in an academic environment. As we can see from the focused analysis of the concept of safe space, it is approached in the literature as a space for marginalised individuals to protect them from any kind of harm – physical, psychological, or emotional (Anderson, 2021). Extending the meaning of 'safe space' under the crisis conditions changes the target group; it can be any of the students who feel discomfort or insecurity. Safe space transforms depending upon catastrophising the difficulties that arise in the normal course of life or education (Anderson, 2021). So, a safe space entails that all students are protected from negative emotions and discomfort.

The war in Ukraine deepened the crisis in all life spheres with a lot of consequences for education, and further critical situations are still possible and unpredictable. The discussion of the meaning of safety becomes extremely relevant for several reasons. First, today's world seems to be the most unsafe place for students affected by the war. The times students are living in are extremely uncertain, and danger can strike them at any time. Second, the crisis reality deepens the inequality in the society and makes the students' environment more and more diverse during wartime because of many factors: the deterioration of financial conditions, the immigration and integration in the new cultural and language conditions, the inner replacement in the badly serviced areas, etc. Third, most students experience both physical and social isolation due to their replacement, being separated from families and friends during wartime because of many factors: the deterioration of financial conditions, the immigration and integration in the new cultural and language conditions, the inner replacement in the badly serviced areas, etc. Third, most students experience both physical and social isolation due to their replacement, being separated from families and friends, and having only distance learning for a period of more than one year. All the listed facts make them more vulnerable and strengthen the feeling of being unsafe, insecure, and hopeless.

Under war conditions, the understanding of the concept of safety has been transformed. In times of war-related insecurity, the feeling of safety implies that being together with somebody (physically or virtually) and trust in other people is more essential than physical safety (McEvoy, 2019), while continuity of care during the separation from family and friends and social isolation is an urgent need (Bungin et al., 2022). Following up on this

argument, I assume that the feeling of safety in crises is supported when others care.

Feminist thinkers have expressed interest in the topic of care. Feminists mainly portray care and caring relationships as positive dimensions of our lives that were devalued by a capitalist and patriarchal order. Feminists argue that care is integrated into the current gender system and both men and women should be involved in caring relationships (Cheal, 2003). The most famous feminists who analyse the concept of care are Nel Noddings and Joan Tronto. Tronto's work on the ethic of care is devoted to care as a political project. Under crisis conditions, the understanding of others' needs, being responsive to these needs, and awareness of collective responsibility for making our lives better transform the power of caring relationships (Tronto, 2013).

Noddings considers care in the system of educational relationships. According to Noddings (1992), caring includes the moral and ethical obligation of humans to care for others. This approach in pedagogy is also defined as the ethic of care. The ethic of care fosters the feeling of responsibility and respect for others' feelings and encourages acting to protect others. Caring is a moral imperative, a social responsibility, and a pedagogical necessity.

Noddings' (1984/2003) seminal work identifies the "ethic of care" as central to the practice of teaching. She characterises the experience of caring in terms of "engrossment" and "motivational displacement". Engrossment involves "an open, nonselective receptivity to the cared-for", a willingness to "really hear, see, or feel what the other tries to convey" (Noddings, 2005, pp. 15–16).

I share this position, substantiated by Noddings (1992), that teachers' motivation to caring action is directed toward the welfare, protection, or enhancement of students being cared for. When teachers care, they step out of their personal frame of reference and go into the other's. When they care, they consider a student's point of view, their needs, and their expectations. The reasons have to do both with what the other person wants and with the objectivity of the situation (in the case of Ukraine, that is a military conflict that people can't influence much). Admitting the uncertainty of the situation, caused by the war, and the impossibility of changing it globally, it is crucial to de-stress and comfort and judge teaching in times of despair as real caring, to act by affection and regard, depending on the particular set of circumstances. The ethic of care is broad and loosely defined; it is not conditioned only by formal rules and predefined regulations of how



to act. It's shaped according to human needs, weaknesses, anxieties, etc. (Noddings, 1984).

Adams & Rose (2014) distinguish between instrumental and performative care. Instrumental care is an intention to be helpful in the academic context to support students' performances, and performative care is a willingness to live up to an "ethical ideal" without delivering any thoughtful response; it's more about staying connected between teachers and students, and students themselves. So, a safe space in a life-threatening crisis could be defined as an environment where the instrumental and performative care is delivered to students who are getting extremely vulnerable, which reduces their feeling of isolation and hopelessness and increases their engagement in education.

One of the main objectives of education, apart from maintaining the instrumental care in terms of the education quality, which policymakers concentrate their attention on, is to develop the relationships of care and trust in the educational environment, and to spend more time on building safe and cooperative spaces. Considering teachers as caring ones, their role of being an instructor extends to delivering caring and trustful relationships through attention and dialogue (Noddings, 2015).

### **Final remarks: Dialogue as a way to realise safe space**

Philosophical dialogue is a way to realise a safe space while staying together and delivering a caring relationship. Dialogue consists of talking and listening, sharing and responding. The purpose of dialogue is for the one-caring and the cared-for to encounter ideas and understandings other than their own. Dialogue reflects an open-ended common search for understanding, empathy, and appreciation, permitting teachers and students to discuss and arrive together at sound decisions. Dialogue also contributes to the development and maintenance of caring relations because it allows students to connect to each other and the teacher through language and shared experience. In using dialogue, one-caring teachers serve as facilitators and counsellors, shifting the focus of the interaction as students' needs arise (Noddings, 1992).

Noddings (1984) also emphasised that what is received as care differs according to the situation that defines who we are and where we are in the world. Care and caring relationships in higher education are not issues of high relevance in literature and are criticized by scholars who say that

care turns a university into a marketised institution where students look for ‘safe’ studying and untroublesome knowledge. However, the multicrisis reality makes changes in understanding the role of effective teaching in higher education institutions and reprioritises what is important in life and highlights the importance of teachers’ care. Papadopoulos (2017) notes that university teachers play a significant role in modelling ‘care’ as recognition of shared humanity and openness to others. Care is defined as a standard, but a standard that is flexible enough to allow us to “live as well as possible in the world” (Tronto, 2013), considering the smaller and larger contexts the care relationship is set.

The feeling of safety and being protected in war conditions is a primary need for students in Ukraine. I do not consider philosophical dialogue as a one-to-one practice between a facilitator and a participant. It’s essential for our research to study a philosophical dialogue as one that can be utilised in the frames of a learning process. Establishing the dialogue in the student group, a teacher should be aware that topics to discuss differ, and they should be offered to a group in the pre-defined form (a picture, a piece of text, or the pre-defined question itself), trying to avoid traumatic triggers but motivating students to think about the current situation they find themselves in from different perspectives, their needs, and imagine the opportunities for the future. According to Helskog (2017), all the materials used by students relate to their personal life, investigate similarities and differences in others’ stories, and accept them with respect and tolerance.

Helskog (2019), describing ways of philosophising, emphasises that the relationships between participants in the group play an important part in collaborative dialogical interaction, as they have different life contexts that have an impact on the flow of philosophising in the group. Considering the moral elements of care outlined by Tronto (2013), it’s important for teachers to get an awareness that they can be role models of a caring personality but not to take the whole responsibility upon themselves. It’s essential to negotiate the main principles of care with all the participants of the social group, passing the power to care to students. These principles can be added to philosophical practice as both topics to discuss and guiding rules of dialogue. These principles include *attentiveness* – noticing the needs of others in dialogues, being able to see the world from the perspective of the one in need; *responsibility* – responding to the needs of others; *responsiveness* – listening to the responses of participants of the interaction and sometimes becoming aware of new unmet needs; and *solidarity* – taking collective responsibility, thinking of people as both receivers and givers

of care, and thinking seriously about the nature of caring needs in society (Tronto, 2013).

To advocate for the role of philosophical dialogue, I should say that it's difficult in an online environment to be a caring personality with respect to people you have never met face-to-face. There are no faces in distance learning. Unfortunately, the education in Ukrainian higher education institutions is delivered only in online mode because of the risks of missile attacks and the unpreparedness of institutions to provide students with appropriately equipped shelters. In order to get to know each other better, the dialogical interaction should not only cover the subject area of the course but also some philosophical topics that are relevant and meaningful. It's essential to go beyond the subject focus and have space for dialogic interaction, selecting diverse philosophical topics within the subject area. According to ideas highlighted above, relating learning situations with personal experiences, listening, understanding of others' perspectives, self-reflection, and respect for human dignity and shared values, and enhancing authentic communication, friendship, and love between participants (Helskog, 2017). We assume involving people in authentic communication positively influences the relational aspects of interactional processes in a pedagogical context and stirs up feelings like trust and empathy, adding the feeling of safety to learning.

The war exacerbates the life situation and ways of life; many topics become more and more relevant compared to the pre-war period. According to Brenifier (2009), topics for philosophical dialogue should come from pressing life conditions. These points don't align with the idea of traditional understandings of safe space, but rather with the safe space as a "community of disagreement" (Iversen, 2018). To gain safety, students should share their concerns and opinions and explore different understandings and interpretations of uncertain life conditions. To better understand themselves, it's essential for students to examine their own beliefs, attitudes, and opinions critically. Philosophical practices include the stages of self-reflection for a deeper understanding of one's feelings, attitudes, values, knowledge, and boundaries, as well as for getting ready for uncertainties in life. Self-reflection also serves to comprehend the meaning of safety and safe space as having some universal criteria of safety, since each person has their own needs and perceptions of safety, depending on the hardships that a person faces. So, a safe space is not something that can be granted to a person. It should be negotiated, expressed and agreed on the rules and terms of interaction with each other. It's better when negotiations have a form of

philosophical practice, when the power of teachers reduces, and a feeling of responsibility and solidarity increases.

To summarise, I will return to the practical reflection part to highlight what insights I've gained while being involved in the dialogical interaction with the theory of defining the content and the essence of safe space. My first attempts to use philosophical practice with my students and to adapt the international experience failed because of an incomplete understanding of the interrelation of safe space and the interrelation of safety and care. I tried to create a “sterile” caring environment and strived for a community of total “agreement”. The harder the life and teaching-learning conditions became, the clearer the necessity of returning to philosophising was. All our lives contain cycles that change and lead us up (and even down) this spiral stairway, as in the picture of my first philosophical practice in 2018. Now I'm almost at the end of the third cycle. I have a firm belief that the question of safe space is a philosophical one, and each person can create it for themselves. To become aware of what safety means, people should delve deep into the dialogue with themselves and others, and even feel very unsafe while being with others, so that they can grasp the meaning of safety. From the teacher's perspective, it's very important to be caring, but it doesn't mean to protect students. This means to be together with them, provide the room for dialogue and give the opportunity to explore the meaning of safety. From my personal perspective, I'm still in great need of safety, and I cannot say for sure if the sense of safety gains new meaning for me and transforms, as the period of uncertainty hasn't finished. But I'm convinced that the best decisions are made under the condition of feeling safe and being involved in dialogue – either internal or external.

## Notes

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## CHAPTER 5: PHILOSOPHISING: A FRUIT OF INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

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### Abstract

*This essay highlights Ukrainian researcher-educators' self-understanding of the need for change and enhancement of approaches and methods in teacher training in Ukraine. In line with a reflective practice research approach, the essay takes its point of departure in the concrete experience of trying out philosophical dialogue with teacher students in accordance with the Dialogos approach (Helskog 2015, 2017, 2019). The philosophical dialogue process seemed to increase the tolerance of the teacher students. Through a critical and theoretical reflection upon this experience, the author delves into the theme of tolerance formation in a pedagogical perspective by focusing on humanistic values, social and communicative competence, and reflexive abilities.*

### Key words:

tolerance, philosophical dialogue, internationalization, training of future primary school teachers.

### Introduction

The idea of writing this article arose because of studying the possibilities of the potential of a democratic approach and philosophical dialogue in the educational system at all levels (from primary education to higher education) in the process of the implementation of internationalization of education in Ukraine. Importantly, the emergence of this need has been made possible by the desire of the Ukrainian education system to change, to move away from the old dogmatic, authoritarian methods of teaching and interaction between all participants in the educational process. Of course, the Ukrainian education system implements Ukraine's overall strategy of striving



ing to join the European Union. Historically, the Ukrainian nation has an inherent desire to educate the younger generation on European values, based on freedom of choice and responsibility for one's choice, equality of all before the law, tolerance, etc. This predilection for democratic values is linked to historical and geographical aspects.

## **The internationalization context**

Working as a lecturer at the National Pedagogical Dragomanov University, I had a great opportunity to participate in several trainings and projects organised by foreign colleagues from countries with developed democracies and a high level of development of education on democratic bases. These events became significant in my pedagogical career and allowed me to be convinced of the importance of the internationalization of education, particularly pedagogical education. This experience will be presented and analysed in this article.

Teichler (1999) considered the internationalization of education as a key policy vector for the development of education in the post-industrial society in Europe and around the world. Teichler (1999) identifies main trends, such as the international mobility of students and teachers, the teaching and learning of foreign languages, cooperative research and research in a particular area of knowledge, and the universalisation, globalization, and internationalization of the content and functions of higher education and the improvement of its quality.

Many academic studies by Teichler (2004), Yemini (2014), Haigh (2014), de Jong & Teekens (2003), and Daniels (2013) point out that the focus of internationalization has now shifted from individual initiatives to institutionalization through the introduction of international links into the educational process of universities. This is due to the awareness of the need to create a unified educational space, the development of a truly international and intercultural academic community, the formation of a global mindset in university graduates, tolerance of the norms and values of other cultures, and the development of intercultural communication skills.

De Jong & Thicken (2003) assert that the increasing internationalization of education is often seen as a positive factor for the development of students' tolerance. They describe efforts to overcome students' cultural differences and balance national interests at the University of Twente (UT) in the Netherlands.

## **Developing tolerance through internationalization**

Firstly, intercultural learning should be achieved by creating intercultural environments (intercultural workshops, cultural festivals, language partnerships) where pupils can meet, socialise, and learn about each other and other cultures.

Secondly, international student exchange programmes allow students to get to know other cultures and countries, to enrich their experiences and perspectives, and to develop tolerance and mutual understanding, respect for cultural differences, and the ability to balance national interests.

Thirdly, to support multimodal communication using different languages, communication technologies, and tools that promote understanding and collaboration between pupils (de Jong & Teekens, 2003).

Fourthly, to include specific activities to build intercultural competence, awareness, and skills to adapt to new cultures, traditions, and living conditions through new activities in the language course of the international mobility programme for students or researchers. (Experience of the University of Barcelona) (Panadés, 2022).

The internalization of education prevents the emergence of dangerous phenomena such as cultural and ideological radicalization. The University of Siena, through the FORWARD project, offers tools to promote integration in multi-ethnic communities:

- a) the collaborative construction of a network composed of experts, researchers, and professionals, coming from international contexts, to facilitate the circulation of multi-methodological perspectives on the different experiences of pluralism, theoretical frameworks, and repertoires of well-established and promising innovative practices;
- b) the co-design and implementation of training courses addressed to professionals to provide them with work in multiethnic contexts;
- c) the development of an institutional curriculum for the three-year degree in Education Sciences at the University of Siena with professional teaching modules including Pedagogy of Deradicalisation, Psychology of Radicalism, Sociology of Migration, Psychology of Multicultural Processes, and European Immigration Law, among others. (Romano & Orefice, 2022:35)

## Concrete reflection: My experiences

My experience of participation in the processes of internationalization of teacher education, as the position of Associate Professor at the National Pedagogical Dragomanov University, has grown from participation in a number of international trainings and workshops in the last decade, from 2018 to the present.

The opportunity to attend and actively participate in international workshops made me think about finding ways to implement democratic approaches and principles into the organization of the training process of future teachers at the New Ukrainian School. It should be noted that all changes (transformations) in a school always begin with teachers, with changing approaches to their training. That is why it is so important to build the process of teacher training on the principles of partnership, dialogue based on tolerance, active participation in pedagogical situations, living professional cases, and changing the content of pedagogical education.

It is necessary to justify the choice of the subject of this article in order to determine the direction of the research. Therefore, it is worthwhile to describe the main problem of further research related to the need for a deeper study of important facts from my teaching practice, which is conditioned by the problem of tolerance in education based on philosophical dialogues.

### Experience 1

The impetus for introducing democratic practices in teacher training was my first participation in the international Swiss-Ukrainian DOCCU project for teachers, in March-May 2018. It was here that I gained my first experience of methods and techniques for building a rights-based and organised education for democratic citizenship.

Here I saw for the first time the implementation of the activity approach based on the tolerant attitude of the participants in the organization of communication and interaction of teachers from pedagogical universities from different cities of Ukraine, who did not know each other. The applied forms and methods of interaction were simple, accessible, interactive, and exciting, on the one hand, and on the other, helped to understand the essence of the presented competences of the culture of democracy through own experience.

The main principle of such training in the culture of democracy was realised through the formula:

‘What? (What is democracy, its basic concepts, knowledge of human rights and understanding of what documents enshrine them);

Though? (opportunity to participate and acquire life experience in the school, which is a model of a micro-society where human rights are upheld, freedom and equality of students, peaceful regulation of conflicts, and mutual respect);

For which? (awareness of how students can realise their human rights and participate in civic life and have a sense of responsibility for themselves and other members of their society)’ (Gollob, Krapf, & Weidinger, 2010: 8).

The experience of my first participation in an international project was described in the chapter with my colleague (Vasiutina & Lukianchenko, 2021). As a result of the participation in the international training, the educators realised the need to develop tolerance in future teachers through recognition of the value of human dignity and human rights; acceptance of cultural diversity; recognition of the value of tolerance, justice, and equality; openness to cultural otherness, beliefs, and world views; and respect for others.

## Experience 2

Then I continued the practice of studying the implementation of democratic foundations in education, and I had the good fortune to join the project in 2018–2020, ‘Development of a Culture of Democracy in Pedagogical Education in Ukraine, Norway and Palestine’.<sup>2</sup> I was in the section ‘Implementation of Democracy in Communication in the Educational Space’ (moderated by Guro Hansen Helskog) and discussed ways to implement the ideas of democracy in the process of training future teachers.

This experience of participating in an international project with Norwegian academics has allowed me to understand more deeply, to live the experience of taking part in philosophical dialogues, to analyse our own feelings and emotions that arose in the interaction with strangers with whom we happened to work in a group, in a team, to reflect and listen to others, and to express my agreement or another point of view.

The experience of the workshop with Professor Helskog gave me a philosophical view of the universe, of the self in it, and of the importance of a critical attitude towards oneself and others, and an understanding and awareness that empathy and tolerance play an important role in the construction of philosophical dialogues, especially in the teaching process.

Helskog focused on the practices of constructing philosophical dialogues

and on the emotional side of conducting them, analysing one's feelings, both positive and negative, and what actions they can prompt one to take.

It was a very important experience of learning and practically mastering democratic principles of the construction of the learning process, which I wanted to immediately implement in my pedagogical activity in the training of future primary school teachers.

So, based on my professional duties, I thought about which disciplines could successfully implement philosophical dialogues in education. Thus, my experience of implementing philosophical dialogues directly in the courses at the National Pedagogical Dragomanov University for full-time students majoring in 'Primary Education' at the bachelor's level.

The gradual incorporation of philosophical dialogues into the training of primary school teachers, where justified where necessary, has brought the issue of tolerance more clearly to the foreground.

The choice of focus for the study was also supported by the analysis of students' experiences in which they described pedagogical situations during practice at school, when there was a need for tolerance both in the activities of the teacher (especially in the process of assessing students' learning achievements) and in the interaction of children among themselves in the children's community. For example, in a modern Ukrainian school, tolerant behaviour among younger pupils was necessary when preparing for the celebration of events with a religious context, in classmates' relations with pupils of other nationalities (especially Muslims and Oriental peoples), in the interaction of pupils from families with different levels of material wealth and social status in society, and in other situations.

### Experience 3

The decisive factor for the further theoretical substantiation of the problem of the necessity of forming tolerance in the educational system (since the school is a small model of society in which it is possible to learn to model reasonable, tolerant interaction of all participants of the educational process) was the successful case of my participation in an international workshop after a break of several years.

Thus, in February 2023, I participated in the workshop on philosophical dialogues hosted by Guro Hansen Heskog for Indian teachers from Savitribai Phule Pune University (Mr. Mahes Mali, Mrs. Nayana Borse, Dr. Poonam Sonawane, and Dipali). The workshop discussed ways to create philosophical dialogues in the educational system.

Again, the key issue in considering the rules of the dialogue was the need to discuss the issue of tolerance. The discussions took place in alternating groups. The composition of the groups changed constantly. This provided an opportunity to hear the views of all participants. During the discussion, the need for prerequisites for philosophical dialogues was raised. What can be considered a philosophical question? How do you create a situation for philosophical dialogue? What human qualities are formed in philosophical dialogues? What emotions motivate people to philosophize?

It was important that during the conversation we found out the inseparability of the following attributes of dialogue, such as empathy, tolerance, logic, respect for the thoughts of other interlocutors through statements in support of this opinion or vice versa of their differences, etc. Dialogue helps to build bridges between people. We have seen that dialogue is impossible without respect for the principles of tolerance.

## Critical reflection

Through the data collected in the process of personal experience of participation in international projects, workshops, and their reflexive analyses, it was possible to identify the issue of tolerance. I have been convinced that the issue of tolerance is very important in the system of education and in building a society based on democratic values.

As a result of conversations and analysis of the series of professional situations described above, an academic elective course for future primary school teachers was created under the title ‘Teaching Tolerance for Primary School Students’. This course included the following range of issues, such as the definition of the essence of the concept of tolerance; axiological and existential approaches as the basis of tolerance; pedagogical tolerance; how to promote a tolerant attitude; how the education system can foster a tolerant personality; prejudices and barriers to tolerance; the danger of low-level tolerance formation for a democratic society; and others.

It should be noted that the dominant method of studying this course was the method of philosophical dialogues. Thus, the sequence of activities and the algorithm of the course deserve attention. At the beginning of the course, key philosophical questions were formulated, such as ‘What is the meaning of tolerance? On purpose, students were asked to explore a particular normative document, such as the ‘Declaration of Principles on Tolerance 1995 by UNESCO’. As an effective method of examining docu-

ments, I suggested the use of the exercise proposed by Helskog, ‘Interpretation, Understanding and Interpersonal Relations’ (Helskog, 2019:197). This activity involves reflecting on problematic issues, during which students have to try learning normative documents. Thus, the students, by performing tasks according to the exercise, read aloud the articles of normative documents, emphasised the most important phrases and keywords, and explained the meaning of a particular article in one laconic sentence. Later, a creative task was offered – to depict thoughtfully an emblem that would embody the essence of the notion of ‘tolerance’.

Students focused on exploring this concept from different angles, such as tolerance at the state level, social dimensions, and the role of education in promoting tolerance. As a result of the reflection, the students showed a deeper and more thoughtful understanding of theoretical concepts, demonstrated teamwork skills, built partnerships and were able to creatively present the acquired understanding of the nature of normative postulates. Emphasising rights and fundamental freedoms for all, regardless of race, gender, language, national origin, religion or disability, and combating intolerance.

I posed problematic issues for students to reflect on in the next class: ‘Are there limits to tolerance?’, ‘Is it possible to be tolerant of intolerant behaviour?’, and ‘Can an intolerant teacher successfully develop a person-centred interaction with all participants of the education process?’.

The next stage of the course for future teachers was to identify and select weekly topics in the primary curriculum where it would be appropriate (to some extent) to focus the attention of primary pupils on aspects of the need for tolerant behaviour.

Also, the students of for full-time students majoring in ‘Primary Education’ at the bachelor’s level gained interesting experience in the process of staging, theatricalisation in pantomime of life situations on overcoming stereotypes of behaviour in society in relation to differences in cultural traditions, religious preferences, membership of a particular subculture, race, and others. The exercises were conducted in mini groups of 3–4 students. Each group acted out a situation, which potentially contained a story that demanded tolerant behaviour. The groups took turns in presenting their work while the others had to guess which situation was being portrayed by the opposing group. The essence of the reflection on the exercise described above was the analysis of the emotions and feelings experienced by the actors in situations of intolerant behaviour. It was also used to analyse the actions that might have been triggered by these emotions.

On the one hand, such exercises aroused great interest among students, satisfaction in their demonstration, and justification for their choice of their own examples, and on the other, the implementation required a thorough understanding of the theoretical foundations of the pedagogy of tolerance and comparing them with their own experience of communication with works of art.

At the end of the special course, an anonymous survey was conducted through the Google form, which showed a real interest in the results of the course and a change in attitudes and perceptions of basic democratic values. So, the students were asked to answer a number of questions, including:

- Was it important for you to study the special course ‘Teaching Tolerance for Primary School Students’?
- Does your understanding of the concept of ‘tolerance’ in the present time coincide with what it was before you studied the special course? How has it changed? (explain)
- How has your attitude to the concept of ‘pedagogical tolerance’ changed?
- Is it possible to teach tolerance at school?
- What do you think is an effective approach to fostering tolerance in future primary school teachers? (Choose 3 answers among: theoretical analysis of Council of Europe documents; philosophical dialogues about the researched aspect; projection of pedagogical situations; solving pedagogical problems on the basis of tolerance; studying the rules of tolerance; using the ‘Do as I do’ technique);
- Tolerant attitude of teachers to children in secondary schools: overestimates students’ self-esteem; creates conditions for the formation of their own personality; educates humanity; reduces the quality of education; creates conditions for permissiveness;
- Are there limits to a tolerant attitude towards people’s behaviour in society?
- Which of the special course topics has been the focus of your thinking?
- Which task or topic was most interesting for you?
- What does it mean to have a successful dialogue in terms of tolerance?
- How do you feel when you encounter intolerant behaviour of educators?
- How does the intolerant behaviour of teachers influence your actions?
- Are there dangers in a tolerant environment? Which exactly?

Thus, the use of methods and tools (philosophical Socratic dialogues, debates, tasks in groups based on partnership, self-analysis of emotional states and factors of their occurrence) provides understanding and perception of



the principles of equality and non-discrimination, tolerance, and social justice.

### **Theoretical reflection. The concept of tolerance approached in literature?**

The reflexive practice described above required a broader reflection on the justification of some patterns of events in my professional life, namely, why during the last 7 years of teaching practice the issue of the need for tolerant interaction with both students and colleagues has arisen in one way or another. Why has this been particularly pronounced during my participation in international training and seminars? In other words, what is the role of internationalization in teacher education, and what is the pedagogical significance of tolerance?

The search for answers to the research questions requires a deeper understanding of the nature of the concept of tolerance at the philosophical level. Focusing on the philosophical direction of the research, we concretise the definition of 'tolerance' that has been selected as the basic concept. The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy interprets tolerance as:

‘[The] term ‘toleration’ – from the Latin *tolerare*: to put up with, countenance or suffer – generally refers to the conditional acceptance of or non-interference with beliefs, actions or practices that one considers to be wrong but still ‘tolerable’, such that they should not be prohibited or constrained. There are many contexts in which we speak of a person or an institution as being tolerant. Thus, for any analysis of the motives and reasons for toleration, the relevant contexts need to be taken into account. (StanfordEncyclopaediaofPhilosophy,2017)

Understanding the concept of ‘tolerance’ and its interpretation in the modern context provides a general understanding of the development of this phenomenon from antiquity to the present. Human society and its progressive representatives have thought about it in different contexts, mainly religious rather than secular.

The works of many philosophers of the past form the basis of the modern understanding of the concept of ‘tolerance’. So, the works of Enlightenment philosophers such as Locke, Voltaire, and Kant are an important springboard for the modern understanding of tolerance. The great thinkers explained the concept of tolerance as a basis for personal inviolability and

security of people of other views and other religions and sought its implementation in real life.

In ‘Letter Concerning Toleration’ (1686), the manifestation of tolerance according to Locke can be traced through his call for tolerance, in particular, religious tolerance in general and mutual tolerance between Christians. By ‘mutual tolerance’, Locke meant much more than the position of meek patience associated with *tolerantia*. Rather, the duty of toleration designated a demanding and complex combination of virtues – including civility – on the part of private individuals as indispensable ethical supports for a public policy of toleration.

Toleration was not itself the *cause* of differences in religious opinions or sectarian affiliation; it simply made pre-existing divisions public. Nevertheless, the open acknowledgement and expression of these differences – particularly through evangelical competition – would become a source of contention and conflict (Locke, 1824:239).

Based on research by contemporary scholars Eveleth (2007) and Bejan (2016) on the works of Enlightenment philosophers, we can state that at that time, tolerance was considered a common value and a basis for peace and harmony between religions, nations, and different social groups. Therefore, their works are basic for many modern philosophers in interpreting tolerance as a value of a democratic society and thus for the educational space as its component.

There is a need to refer to contemporary philosophical thought in order to realise the importance of tolerance in teachers and the necessity of fostering it for their successful future interaction with people belonging to different religious and social groups and representatives of different cultures in the current educational environment.

Also, the need to address contemporary philosophers on the interpretation of the essence of tolerance is caused by the fact that some participants of the educational process (teachers, parents, students, and pupils) do not have a clear understanding of the goals, principles, and necessity of tolerance education in the modern world with numerous challenges of political, economic, and mental nature. Such facts are also characteristic, for example, of the Romanian education system, which is confirmed by the studies of Albu & Cojocariu (2015) and Țurcan (2015).

So, what is the interpretation of the concept of ‘tolerance’ among contemporary philosophers?

In our research, we rely on the interpretation of tolerance according to Forst (2013), which the contemporary philosopher outlined in his mono-

graph ‘Tolerance in Conflict: The Past and the Present’. As Horton (2013) states, this is the most significant study to date, devoted to tolerance and written by a prominent political philosopher of our time. Forst’s book explores four philosophical concepts of toleration: the permission conception, the coexistence conception, the respect conception (which admits of two forms – formal equality and qualitative equality) and the esteem conception. Each of these concepts represents a different approach to understanding toleration and its place in society. Forst (2013) examines the concept of tolerance from both historical and contemporary perspectives. In Forst’s view, a historical understanding of tolerance can be useful for contemporary debates on issues such as multiculturalism and the accommodation of religious minorities.

Forst (2013) argues that tolerance should not be seen as mere acceptance of diversity but rather as a process of negotiation and conflict resolution in situations of social and political disagreement. The contemporary philosopher stresses the importance of distinguishing between tolerance and indifference or mere tolerance and emphasises that true tolerance involves accepting and respecting the views of the other, even if they are not shared. He also advocates that tolerance should not be limited to respect for other cultures and opinions but should also include respect for human rights and the principles of justice and equality.

Forst argues that toleration is not simply a matter of peaceful coexistence or a willingness to put up with something we dislike, but rather a complex and multifaceted political concept that requires careful analysis.

In the context of our study, the views of another contemporary American philosopher and theologian, Philip Quinn, on the definition of the essence of tolerance are of interest. In his article ‘On Religious Diversity and Tolerance’, Quinn (2001) explores the relationship between religious diversity and tolerance from an existentialist perspective. Quinn argues that tolerance is not just about accepting differences or being indifferent to them, but that it requires a deeper understanding of the different ways in which people experience and make sense of the world.

Quinn (2001) notes that from an existentialist perspective, meaning in life is not something that is given to us by tradition or authority but is something that we must create for ourselves through our choices and actions. This means that different people and cultures may have very different ways in which they understand the world and find meaning in it. According to Quinn (2001), true tolerance requires us to appreciate these different ways of understanding the world, even if we do not agree with them or do not

share them ourselves. It means recognising that our own perspective is not the only true one and that other people may have equally valid reasons for their beliefs and practices.

Quinn (2001) also points out that tolerance is not a matter of moral relativism or subjectivism, but that it requires recognition of certain universal values, such as human dignity and respect for others. This means that while we can appreciate and tolerate different ways of understanding the world, we must also be willing to defend these universal values and condemn practices that violate them, such as discrimination or violence against others.

When considering the essence of the phenomenon ‘tolerance’, it is necessary to analyse how we can consider tolerance as a quality of a personality and what personality can be called tolerant from the position of modern philosophical thought. This understanding is important for us to find its pedagogical meaning, namely, the possibilities of the education system to bring up such a quality of personality.

Turning to Forst (2013), we find his description of the tolerant person. He argues that a tolerant person is one who acknowledges and accepts the legitimacy of different views and perspectives, even if he or she does not personally agree with them. The philosopher stresses the importance of openness and empathy for a tolerant person who is willing to listen and interact with others, even if they hold opposing views, and can put himself in others’ shoes to better understand their perspectives. A tolerant person, in his view, recognises the limitations of their own knowledge and understanding, is willing to challenge their own assumptions and beliefs, and engages in constructive dialogue with others to broaden their understanding of the world.

The importance of a tolerant person’s empathy is also pointed out by Quinn (2001). Gasser (2022), a researcher of the philosopher’s views, also describes Quinn’s focus on the emotional and cognitive aspects of tolerance. Quinn believes that tolerance requires people to have empathy and the ability to see things from the perspective of others, to confront their own prejudices and biases, and to engage in self-criticism and self-reflection. Emphasising the role of emotions in tolerance, Quinn argues that emotional reactions can facilitate or hinder the development of tolerance. For example, anger and fear can lead to hostility towards others, while empathy and compassion can promote understanding and acceptance.

The presence of empathy as a predictor of tolerance in the speech and action dimension is confirmed by Butrus and Witenberg (2013). At the

same time, openness and agreeableness are predictors of tolerance in the belief dimension.

### **Developing tolerance in the education system**

It should be emphasised that it is important for our research to find the justification of ways and methods of forming tolerance both in future teachers (especially in primary schools) and their pupils as an important part of society, which in many respects determines the vector of development of society and its mood. Reflecting on the qualities of a tolerant personality, one realises that such personalities are essential for building a tolerant society, to which all civilised societies, including Ukraine, aspire. In this connection, the problem is how and on what basis a tolerant society can be built, and what the role of teacher education is in the development of tolerance. The fact that a school, a class, or any other pupil group is a model of a micro-society creates a unique opportunity, a condition for the favourable formation of tolerance in each member of the group, as well as for tolerant interaction in the group itself. Directly, these aspects have been the focus of my pedagogical work in recent years. It is through my own pedagogical experience that I have found confirmation of the philosophical reflections described by Forst on the qualities of a tolerant person and her role in building a tolerant society.

According to Forst (2013), a tolerant society is one in which individuals and groups can coexist and interact despite their differences. It is not simply a society in which people can freely express their opinions without fear of persecution, but rather a society in which people are willing to engage in dialogue and debate with those who hold different views. In a tolerant society, individuals and groups can recognise and respect the rights of others, even if they disagree with their views. This follows from Forst's preferred respect conception of tolerance, according to which it proceeds from a morally grounded form of mutual respect on the part of the individuals or groups who exercise tolerance. The tolerating parties respect one another as autonomous persons or as equally entitled members of a political community constituted under the rule of law' (Forst, 2013, p. 29).

Forst stresses the importance of reciprocity in a tolerant society. He argues that people should be willing to be tolerant of others, even if they do not agree with their views. This requires a willingness to listen and interact with others, rather than simply rejecting their views.

Forst also notes that a tolerant society requires a commitment to social and political equality. He argues that a society characterised by inequality and injustice is unlikely to be truly tolerant because marginalised or oppressed people and groups do not have the same opportunities to engage in dialogue and debate.

The key element of a tolerant society, according to Forst, is the respect and recognition of the equal rights and values of every member of society, regardless of their cultural, religious, or ideological characteristics. This creates the conditions for interaction and cooperation between different groups, promoting peaceful and harmonious coexistence. Thus, tolerance is a prerequisite for a just and democratic society, as it allows for the peaceful coexistence of diverse and contradictory views.

Quinn's thinking is close to Forst's. As Gasser (2022), a researcher of Quinn's views, notes, Quinn (2001) emphasised the importance of recognising and valuing the existential diversity of human experience as well as defending universal values and fighting against injustice and oppression when considering a tolerant society. In Quinn's view, the values of mutual respect and equality are important for tolerance. The philosopher believes that people should respect each other's differences and recognise that no one has the truth or a monopoly on the correctness of matters of faith and morality. Quinn also stresses the importance of justice and democratic processes to ensure that minority rights are protected.

According to Quinn (2001), democratic values such as freedom of expression, equality and individual autonomy are essential for creating a society that tolerates diversity and are essential to the concept of tolerance. In his view, democracy provides a framework for balancing the interests and needs of different groups and individuals and for resolving conflicts between them peacefully; it encourages people to engage in open and respectful dialogue with each other; and it creates opportunities for individuals and groups to participate in the political process and to express their views.

Analysing the views of contemporary philosophers on tolerance and projecting them onto the realities of today's global world and the interaction of people of different nations, cultures, and social statuses, the question arises as to whether there are limits to tolerance and whether it is possible to be tolerant of intolerant manifestations. These were the kinds of problematic issues that arose for my students in the process of teaching the special course on developing tolerance in future teachers that I described in the previous section.

In searching for answers to the questions posed, we turn to the views of Forst (2013) and Quinn (2001), who share the general idea of the limits of tolerance but have some differences in their approaches. Forst (2013) acknowledges that there are limits to tolerance, namely through limiting violence and unacceptable speech. He emphasises that tolerance does not have to be unconditional and that intolerant views that are contrary to democratic principles and human rights can be restricted. 'The limits of toleration are reached when others are denied their basic right to justification in general, or, alternatively, this right is flouted in cases' (Forst, 2013, p. 455). He argues that tolerance should have its limits when it comes to violence, suppression, or violation of the rights of others, i.e., in cases where intolerance turns into violence or unacceptable speech, society should limit these expressions in order to protect the rights and security of all citizens.

Quinn (2001) also recognises the limits of tolerance. He argued that democracy should be tolerant but should not tolerate intolerant attitudes that threaten democracy itself or the rights of other citizens. He believed that a restriction of intolerant views may be justified when they undermine the basic principles and values of a democratic society and the rights of others.

Thus, both Forst and Quinn recognise that there are boundaries to tolerance, especially when intolerant views threaten the democratic principles, rights and security of others. However, the exact boundaries and how these boundaries are defined may vary according to the specific context and circumstances. The question of the limit of tolerance is also a subject of reflection in academia by Williams & Waldron (2008) in 'Toleration and Its Limits' and Russell (2017).

So, I think that tolerance is expressed in respecting the opinions of others, trust and honesty in relationships, humanity, peacefulness, and the ability to minimise misunderstandings through dialogue and agreement. In this regard, the limit of tolerance can be defined as a balance between acceptable norms of behaviour and the freedom to express one's thoughts and behaviour without critical consequences for the subjects of interaction.

The interesting experience of other researchers who shed light on the pedagogical aspect of tolerance should be mentioned, such as Albu & Cojocariu, 2015; Boghian, 2016; Cherednyk, 2019; Kuzmenko, 2020; Kremen, 2011; Tourinan, 2008; Thompson, 2014; and Mamlok, 2023. According to Mamlok's (2023) views, tolerance is perceived as a means of confronting hostility, raising awareness of cultural differences, mitigating violence, and upholding liberal and democratic values. Mamlok argues that fostering a

sense of tolerance in students, especially in divisive communities, requires the educational system to move beyond discursive interpretations of tolerance and promote a pragmatic understanding of tolerance through an agonistic prism, according to Dewey (2008), that will promote a more flexible and humane approach to resolving conflicts of different origins.

Developing a pragmatic sense of tolerance through an agonistic lens in education involves the arrangement of school life in a way that would offer students experiences that would encourage them constantly to consider their attitudes and assumptions towards the other. Inter alia, nurturing intellectual attitudes and flexible habits is necessary for supporting students' engagement in a pluralistic society. I have argued that, in addition to cultivating a Deweyan understanding of habit among students, it is important to help students grapple with disagreements and conflicts in an agonistic way. I contend that the amalgam of a pragmatic understanding of habit through an agonistic perspective can help students to embody a sense of tolerance, despite distinct disagreements and conflicts. Yet the conditions needed for such an approach cannot be based on laws (such as Bill 21) that, in the guise of neutrality attempt to erase not only the visible differences among social groups, but also the underlying cultural, political, and discursive cleavages. (Mamluk, 2023:67)

At the same time, based on my personal experience of participating in the international trainings and workshops described above, I can state that philosophical dialogues are one of the effective methods and ways of forming tolerance.

The rationale for the effectiveness of using dialogues to promote tolerance among all participants in the educational process is that only through open and constructive dialogue can mutual understanding and respect between people with different views and perspectives be achieved. Dialogue should be open to different cultures, opinions, and perspectives, and its participants should seek to understand each other, not to communicate their own rightness. Only through such dialogue can a deep understanding of different cultures and beliefs be achieved and the basis for a tolerant and harmonious society be created (Forst, 2013).

According to Forst (2013), the conduct of a dialogue should be based on the following rules: 1. Mutual respect and equality between dialogue participants. Openness and willingness to listen to the points of view of other participants without prejudice and a desire to dominate others. Recognition of the legitimacy of different views and perspectives, even if they do not coincide with one's own beliefs. 2. Focusing on shared values and interests.

3. Bringing a problem or issue to the table and exploring different aspects



of the problem from different perspectives. 4. Finding possible solutions or compromises that will satisfy all participants in the dialogue. 5. Adherence to logical and ethical norms during the dialogue.

Thus, for Forst, dialogue is an important tool for building tolerance and a way to achieve peace and justice in society.

The dialogue, when conducted systematically, not only fosters tolerance in individuals but also creates the conditions for the development of a tolerant society. The ability of people to better understand each other, exchange ideas, and respect different points of view are attributes of the democratic process that contribute to a more tolerant society (Quin, 2001). Hence, I have been suggesting that the views of contemporary philosophers on the usefulness of dialogue for fostering tolerance within the education system should be used.

It is worth noting that my own teaching experience has confirmed the effectiveness of dialogical philosophising according to the Dialogos approach (Helskog, 2015; 2017) in the process of educating future primary school teachers in tolerance. I can claim to have successfully applied philosophical dialogues according to Helskog's approach. Although this dialogue approach was developed by a scholar to search for the nature of wisdom and, at the same time, to develop the personal and relational wisdom of students, it is universal in that it incorporates reflection on the nature of tolerance into the educational process and, at the same time, builds tolerance in its participants. Thus, by using appropriate philosophical methods in practice, I became convinced that such trusting dialogues, with respect to the interlocutor, with a willingness to perceive another's point of view, with tolerance for inconsistencies, and with a willingness to show empathy, are only possible with interlocutors who possess the quality of tolerance.

On the other hand, the systematic application of philosophy in the educational process creates favourable conditions for fostering tolerance in those participants in the educational process who have a low level of this personal quality, which is important for a democratic society. This, in turn, requires a person to work on his or her behaviour, a certain will and intellectual effort, and attempts to move away from stable stereotypes to perceive information critically. It is the need for such work on oneself, on the regulation and control of one's feelings and emotions, that coincides with the vision of the problem of fostering tolerance in students in accordance with Mamlok (2023).

A closer look at the phases and ways of philosophising according to the approach of Helskog (2015; 2017), which I managed to implement in the

process of studying the special course ‘Education of Tolerance in Future Teachers’ at the Pedagogical University in Kiev (Ukraine), deserves attention. Thus, of the three justified Helskog phases, which define the process of ‘Dialogos’ development and represent the didactic structure of the ‘Dialogos’ curriculum, I managed to successfully implement only the first two. Namely, the humanistic-educational and the ethical-philosophical phases. The students were not yet ready for the third phase of Dialogos, existential-spiritual, due to insufficient time of immersion in the special course and mental unreadiness to make qualitative changes in their personal beliefs at the existential level. Let us focus on the essence of the stages of Dialogos development according to Helskog (2015; 2017).

**Humanistic-Pedagogical Phase:** This phase focuses on a humanistic and pedagogical approach to philosophical practice. Participants engage in discussions that promote critical thinking, analysis and conceptualization. They are encouraged to problematise their own thinking and the thinking of others in a more abstract way.

**Ethical-philosophical phase:** The second phase emphasises ethical and philosophical enquiry. Participants delve into ethical questions, dilemmas, and moral considerations. Phenomenological approaches may be used in the discussion, encouraging participants to explore their life experiences and perspectives, seeking a deeper understanding of ethical issues.

**Existential-Spiritual Phase:** The final phase focuses on the existential and spiritual aspects of philosophical practice. Participants may engage in contemplative and introspective discussions addressing questions of meaning, purpose, and the spiritual dimensions of life.

According to Helskog (2017), throughout all three stages, different ways of philosophising are encouraged:

The modes of philosophising can be labelled abstract-analytical modes, phenomenological-hermeneutical modes, and spiritual-contemplative modes. By ‘abstract-analytical modes of philosophising’, I mean facilitating in a way that makes students analyse, conceptualize, and problematise in an abstract way, both their own thinking and the thinking of others. Through this, they learn how to pay close attention to what is said or written, and they learn to reflect upon their own thoughts as well as the thoughts of others.

By ‘phenomenological-hermeneutical modes of philosophizing’, I mean a mode of philosophizing that relates to the outer world with an attitude of openness and willingness to let the Other (whether fellow students, a concept, a text, a movie, or an image) speak to us, with the risk of being existentially changed or transformed by the Other.

By the ‘spiritual-contemplative mode of philosophizing’, I mean a mode of philosophizing in which we have moved Dialogos (through reason, words, and speech) to a state of being beyond or underneath logos: to pure Being. Dialogue in this phase involves being together on a deeper level, in which ideas are allowed to float in a freer way. (Helskog 2017: 6)

Focusing on the results of the practical application of different ways of philosophising according to the Helskog approach in the process of education of tolerance in future primary school teachers, we can assert the effectiveness of this method. After all, the very process of dialogue by its very nature is impossible without the presence of tolerance in interlocutors. It implies respect for the interlocutor and readiness to understand him/her without any stereotypes. And the very process of dialogical philosophising is an effective method of tolerance education.

Hence, the common feature of the approaches described in terms of the interpretation of tolerance in the pedagogical aspect is the assumption that, regardless of the focus of consideration of the phenomenon of ‘tolerance’, whether as a quality of personality or as a principle of the educational process, tolerance can be developed and implemented only through dialogical interaction.

## Final remarks

In this essay, I have studied effective methods and ways of promoting tolerance among future primary school teachers during their training at a pedagogical university in Ukraine.

First of all, I paid attention to the fact that my interest in the problem of tolerance in the pedagogical aspect arose due to the possibility of personal participation in international trainings and workshops in which teachers from countries with a developed level of democracy in society participated, including in the educational process, in the pre-war years in Ukraine. I saw the role of internationalization in education in a qualitative personal change, which manifested itself in a change in the choice of approaches and teaching methods in the training of future teachers. As a result of my participation in international educational projects, my pedagogical arsenal changed from reproductive teaching methods to interactive methods based on dialogue, active interaction of all participants in the pedagogical process based on trust, and respect for the rights of students, imbued with empathy.

Secondly, I reveal my personal experience of pedagogical practice, highlighting my personal experience of teaching practice using reflection as a research method. In this way, according to Helskog, G. H. & Weiss, M. N. (2023), there was a self-understanding of my professional practice. My experience focused on the use of philosophical dialogues according to Helskog's (2015; 2017) 'Dialogos' approach to reflect on the nature of the phenomenon of tolerance and the importance of its presence as a necessary personality quality for a modern democratic teacher. In order to theoretically underpin the effectiveness of using philosophical dialogues to teach tolerance, the views of contemporary philosophers such as Forst and Quine were analysed. Their views on tolerance are united by the fact that they declare that the essence of tolerance is not just a matter of peaceful coexistence or a willingness to put up with what we do not like, but above all a recognition of respect for the views of the other, even if they are not shared (Forst, 2013). At the same time, tolerance should not be limited to respect for other cultures and opinions but should be based on democratic values such as freedom of expression, equality and recognition of individual autonomy (Quinn, 2001); principles of justice, respect and recognition of the rights and values of every member of human society, regardless of cultural, religious and ideological differences (Forst, 2013).

Thirdly, in the process of working on the issue of tolerance, the aspect of the limit of tolerance and its boundaries came to the surface. This aspect became especially relevant in wartime, when the feelings of social justice in the global context, loss of the human right to life and its security, and extermination of the Ukrainian nation only because Ukrainians want to determine their own way of development became more acute. The martial law has aggravated the issues of tolerance within Ukraine itself. Thus, public opinion in Ukraine increasingly supports feelings of national identity, dignity, and subjectivity in the global space.

The realities of today emphasise the need to place tolerance and the limits of its boundaries. While a tolerant society involves the ability to appreciate and tolerate different ways of understanding the world, it also involves a willingness to defend universal values of the existential diversity of human experience and to condemn practices that violate them, such as discrimination or violence against others (Quin, 2001).

Fourthly, all these tendencies are reflected in the educational process, which strongly updates the importance of education in the development of tolerance in all its participants.

In the course of the study, it became clear that tolerance is the most important guideline of modern European educational policy. On the one hand, tolerance is manifested among the moral values of humanism and becomes the basis of modern education, which transmits the norms of human relations and is the basis for the humanization of knowledge in the field of cultural dialogue. On the other hand, it is a principle of life organization that determines a person's attitude to the world and behaviour in interaction with others, and a necessary personal quality of a teacher.

I define tolerance as a professionally significant integrative quality of a teacher, which ensures his/her ability to establish dialogue relations with all participants of the pedagogical process (students, their parents, teachers, school administration) on the basis of respect for their opinions, values and other personal differences. A teacher's tolerance implies his/her ability to show trust and openness in relationships, which is ensured by the presence of formed structural components of readiness for tolerant education of students, namely humanistic values, emotional intelligence, social and communicative competence and reflective abilities.

Finally, I presented my experience in testing the assumption of how philosophising according to the 'Dialogos' approach (Helskog, 2015; 2017) can help student teachers to become tolerant. As a result of the successful implementation of the humanistic-pedagogical and ethical-philosophical phases of philosophising, I can observe positive qualitative personal changes in the students with regard to the formation of tolerance, as evidenced by the results of reflections and questionnaires at the end of the special course. This is confirmed by the students' opinions that, as a result of studying the special course 'Education of Tolerance in Future Teachers' on the basis of philosophical dialogues, they were able to perceive and understand the point of view of other people which differs from their own, to perceive interlocutors as they are, and to show patience with what seems new and incomprehensible at first sight.

## Notes

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through education, migration and music, as well as contemporary views on the implementation of the activity-based approach in primary schools.

- <sup>2</sup> The project was led by Øyvind Wistrøm and Ingrid Reite Christensen from the University of South-Eastern Norway. Ingrid facilitated the third day of the first of the two three-day workshops.

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## CHAPTER 6: BECOMING ROCKED: A PALESTINEAN – NORWEGIAN PARTNERSHIP<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

*This paper critically reflects on how to develop good project partnerships in international higher education collaboration between Palestine and Norway. While formal partnership requirements often focus on evidence-based measures and success, the complexities of international collaboration are shaped by the political realities in Palestine, where war and systematic oppression present significant challenges. Additionally, partnerships like ours are challenged by historical and cultural differences and North-South power imbalances. To explore these complexities, Mr. Wistrøm shares his experience from a 1999 meeting with Dr. Adwan in Bethlehem, where Palestinian and Israeli families engaged in dialogue. Drawing on Paulo Freire's ideas on education for liberation (Freire, 2005), this story displays how the Palestinian facilitates meaningful learning and how the Norwegian partner is willing to be transformed, rethink assumptions, and engage in shared suffering. With these insights, we suggest that a good partnership requires mutual acknowledgement and acceptance of difference and perhaps even a sense of professional calling.*

### **Keywords:**

*International partnerships, communication, higher education, reflective practice research, dialogue, Palestine*

### **Introduction**

In this paper, the authors critically reflect on the philosophical question of how to develop a good project partnership in international higher education collaboration between Palestine and Norway. While formal partnership frameworks often emphasise evidence-based measures, progress, and suc-

cess, the realities of international collaboration present deeper challenges. Collaborations like ours must navigate profound historical and cultural differences, as well as entrenched North-South power imbalances. In Palestine, the backdrop of war, violence, and systematic oppression over decades adds further complexity to the partnership.

As a starting point for critical reflection, Mr. Wistrøm recalls his first meeting with Dr. Adwan at a 1999 dialogue seminar between Palestinian and Israeli families in Bethlehem. Drawing inspiration from Paulo Freire's vision of education for liberation (Freire, 2005), we analyse the seminar's possibilities and challenges for partnership development. Our reflection highlights the ambiguities and open questions surrounding the Northern framing of collaborations with the Global South. Acknowledging that the partnerships in higher education are far from streamlined, developing collaboration must account for deep changes of mindsets, suffering, and embracing – and accepting – difference. We critically reflect on the development of a partnership within the context of a 30-year collaboration between higher education institutions in Palestine (Gaza and the West Bank) and Norway.<sup>5</sup> Partnership is seen as a hope for education and a pathway to a peaceful future. Becoming familiar with the context of the project in Palestine is a prerequisite for developing this partnership. Our Palestinian colleagues have been eager to show us beautiful sunsets, rows of olive trees, delicious cuisine, and the warmth and hospitality of their communities. However, the Palestinian people also live through the hardships of occupation and conflict, marked by walls and checkpoints. Since the war in October 2023, Gaza's universities have been destroyed, and the university staff in the West Bank increasingly face unpredictable violence, including systemic surveillance, arbitrary arrests, and killings. The current situation in Palestine is harsh, yet partnership remains central in the hope of securing a peaceful future and development.

Partnership emerged as the 'new big idea' in development discourse at the beginning of this millennium (Kayizzi-Mugerwa, 1998). According to Barnett et al. (2010), a partnership is defined as "an alliance of resources and expertise between organizations aimed at achieving a mutually desired outcome." Since 2015, partnerships within higher education have evolved into a component of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 2015). Higher education is considered a catalyst for stabilization, securitisation, reconstruction, state-building, and peacebuilding (Milton and Barakat, 2016). International collaborations represent investments in developing quality teaching and research, as well as in peacebuilding between

countries of the “Global North”, comprising wealthier nations with more stable infrastructure, such as Norway, and those in the “Global South”, encompassing politically destabilized states like Palestine (Pherali & Lewis, 2019).

Jones et al. (2016) describe factors influencing the necessary components of a partnership, including a clear aim, clear institutional mandates, good relationships, a clear conceptual foundation, as well as commitment to actions. Developing those partnerships is guided by the slogan “facts inform policy,” meaning that international projects must be founded on evidence-based methods of collaboration and effective knowledge development (NO-RAD, 2021).

Building such partnerships, however, involves complex power dynamics and challenges associated with outsider perspectives in establishing projects abroad (Cai & Leask, 2024). However, such ideal partnerships have been critiqued for adhering to a transactional logic rather than evolving into transformational relationships – collaborative, reciprocal engagements capable of generating mutual learning and benefit across the global South and North (Enos & Morton, 2003; Knight, 2012, p. 27). The goal is to promote partnership engagement that reflects cooperation and symmetry rather than domination or imposition from one partner onto the other (Mwangi, 2017, p. 37). Nevertheless, issues of so-called “white supremacy” remain a core challenge, denoting an asymmetry and domination by the global North countries (Downes, 2013; Knight, 2012; Sutton, 2010). One question, then, is on what terms such partnerships can be developed, ensuring symmetry. The answers are many on ideal, structural, and theoretical levels, as it cannot be seen as a given that such initiatives from a country in the “north” will succeed.

However, in this paper, we see situated reflective practice and interpersonal relationships as crucial for developing insight, engagement, and transformation (Ma & Montgomery, 2019; Orton, 2000, pp. 166–167). Our experiences suggest that partnerships focused on delivering evidence-based measures, demonstrating progress, and ensuring success often conflict with the lived realities of those involved and might also fail to address the intricate dynamics inherent in global North-South partnerships. We take as our starting point a story told by Mr. Wistrøm from Norway about how a Palestinian partner, Dr. Adwan, facilitated the emergence of a long-lasting partnership, making the first steps of realizing what developing a partnership might entail, including possibilities, challenges, and stumbling blocks.

## Reflecting on international collaboration

This theoretical paper draws upon key methodological elements from reflective practice research (Helskog & Weiss, 2023; Lindseth, 2021). Conducting a theoretical and philosophical exploration, we see personal experience as a key source for developing knowledge. A reflective practice approach can offer meaningful orientation marks instead of merely stating factual knowledge (Lindseth, 2017; Weiss, 2021). Reflective research aims to create systematized accounts of a philosophical problem, explored systematically through subjective experiences as opposed to an empirical research methodology, whereas data should be gathered from objective, observable phenomena (e.g., Popper 2002). Contextual and personal interpretations are not constraints but rather *capacities* to unfold the character of the social world (Barad, 1996, p. 18). Our reflective approach aims to provide orientations for meaning and seeks to develop theoretical generalizations (Flyvbjerg, 2011). In this paper, this means that our critical reflections are intended to be transferable – emerging from specific, context-bound experiences that can be recognized and applied in analogous settings by others involved in the internationalization of higher education (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004).

This paper has three authors, each contributing a distinct perspective. For practical and methodological reasons, we have chosen to focus on one story – Dr. Adwan’s facilitation of a seminar – narrated by Mr. Wistrøm, with Dr. Christensen serving as a summarizing witness to our collective theoretical analyses. Methodologically, this paper follows an exploratory three-step approach, as outlined by Lindseth (2020; 2023), which can be summarized as follows:

*Step 1: Narrating a personal experience marked by wonder, discrepancy, or surprise*

Concrete and original reflection, where the experience is narrated “straight from the heart”. A philosophical question can be described as a fundamental inquiry about reality and knowledge, and often involves morality or existence.

*Step 2: Critical reflection and selecting a philosophical question.* Core themes are drawn from the experience guided by the question, “What is at stake in this narrative?” A philosophical question can be described as a fundamental inquiry about reality and knowledge, and it often involves

morality or existence. The philosophical question does not seek an objective, empirical answer (Blackburn, 1999).

*Step 3: Theoretical and philosophical reflection elaborating on the philosophical question*

Theoretical reflection, where the themes are generalized and reflected upon in general terms, drawing on philosophical and theoretical perspectives and research literature. Drawing inspiration from Paulo Freire's ideas on education for liberation (Freire, 2005), we undertake a critical analysis of the seminar's possibilities and challenges for the development of a partnership, given the position of a Norwegian as a representative of the more powerful party in a collaborative project.

We critically acknowledge that the perspectives – and even the methodologies in this paper – are entrenched by historical, cultural, and political power issues in Western dominant epistemological frameworks (Mignolo, 2010; Smith, 1999). Building on this awareness, we will follow Mr. Wistrøm's story and his efforts to develop an authentic partnership with colleagues in Palestine, striving for collaborations that might transcend traditional power imbalances.

In the following sections, we will be introduced to the development of a partnership in higher education, with the voice of Mr. Wistrøm from Norway encountering Dr. Adwan from Palestine.

## **Step 1: Mr. Wistrøm's rocking experience and the birth of a longstanding partnership**

As a starting point for critical reflection, we recount Mr. Wistrøm's experience during a dialogue meeting between Palestinian and Israeli families organized by Dr. Adwan in Bethlehem in 1999. Mr. Wistrøm's story is part of a broader series of initiatives and projects aimed at establishing a university partnership between Palestine and Norway. The first meeting between Mr. Wistrøm and Dr. Sami took place in 1994 during the process of the Oslo Accord<sup>6</sup>. Dr. Adwan was invited to Oslo to talk about education in Palestine. Mr. Wistrøm worked in teacher education at Vestfold University College, now the University of South-Eastern Norway. Hearing about Dr. Adwan coming to Oslo for a talk about education in Palestine, the two felt an immediate connection. This marked the start of 30 years of cooperation between Palestine and Norway, which has also included

Dr. Christensen over the last decade. The recent project “Developing Early Childhood Education in Palestine and Norway”<sup>7</sup> is a collaboration between the University of South-Eastern Norway (USN), the Islamic University of Gaza (IUG), and Hebron University (HU). The project has established two master’s degree programmes at the Palestinian partner universities and an English master’s degree in Pedagogy at the University of South-Eastern Norway. It has awarded several MA scholarships and engaged in extensive network-building for the future development of education and higher education.

*“I was sitting in the meeting room at Talita Kumi School, originally a German missionary school at the border between Israel and the Palestinian city of Bethlehem. I had come to Palestine as a representative from the University of South-Eastern Norway (then Vestfold University College), meeting with Dr. Sami Adwan from Bethlehem University.*

*At the meeting, we were a group of approximately 25 people: three generations of Israelis, three generations of Palestinians, and some international participants, including me. The leader of the session was Dr. Sami Adwan from Bethlehem University. The Talita Kumi school is situated on the border between the Israeli and the Palestinian-controlled areas close to Bethlehem, where the participants entered the school from each side: Palestinians from the Bethlehem side, the Israelis from the Israeli-controlled area. But neither of the groups was allowed to cross into “the other” side. Military checkpoints and regulations secured this.*

*The meeting had been going on for almost three days. It was a dialogue meeting: “Telling your story”. The purpose of the whole session was to hear about the others’ stories and get to know them, to understand what is labeled “the others”. Participation was voluntary. The Israeli group came from a settlement just outside the Palestinian city of Hebron: originally Palestinian territory but conquered and made into a Jewish settlement during the war in 1948. The Palestinians came from a refugee camp in Bethlehem, most of them originating from the very village outside Hebron that the Israelis conquered in 1948. Three generations from each side; the eldest telling their stories from the war and what happened then, and the fighting and how they lived thereafter; the second generation about building a settlement and getting a so-called “normal” life or about surviving in a refugee camp; but the youngest generation was more concerned about exchanging pictures of football idols or rock stars. Or they discussed the political situation.*

*In the closing session, everybody was supposed to say a few words about how they felt and thought. One of the last participants was a Palestinian teacher from the refugee camp. He stated quietly, "I am glad I participated in this meeting. I have come to know you Israelis much better: your thoughts, your opinions, you as persons. And I hope I will be in contact with you in the future because I have come to know you. But the sun that shines down on the swimming pools in your settlement – situated where the houses and farms of my ancestors lived – does not manage to shine down on the narrow street in my refugee camp and through the broken window in my small apartment where I have to live with my whole family in a two-room small apartment, in a Bethlehem locked in and controlled by the Israeli army... "*

*That statement rocked me. I had visited that refugee camp a couple of days earlier. But still, the statement rocked me in the meaning of realizing or understanding that there is a reality that is beyond the theoretical or academic picture or description of a topic or question, be it political or social or otherwise. I was shaken out of a comfortable "wishing that it is possible to end or reduce the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians through dialogue and by getting to know each other". I suddenly realized more deeply the hard political reality of injustice and unfairness as the core source of the conflict. Visiting the refugee camp was an emotional experience. But the statement suddenly embedded the joint theoretical (from reading about the history) and the experiential/emotional (through the visit to the camp) understanding of the conflict. It was a kind of reflective addition to theoretical knowledge and emotional experience and a kind of "imperative realization of facts". And has been ever since. It has been a driving force in my cooperation with both Palestinians and Israelis for 30 years, as well as when working with other political conflicts. [ ... ]*

*[Talking] about internationalization, that has to include practice or experience or meeting with reality. It is possible to read about discrimination or racism as a theoretical question. But you do not fully understand or realize the concept of discrimination if you have not experienced – seen, experienced yourself or met a human who has been discriminated – how this impacts a human being."*



## Step 2: Initial question: What is a good partnership

Throughout our collaboration on this paper, we have engaged in extensive reflections (along with drafts and stories) to capture how it resonated with and impacted us. We also questioned the events and the possible underlying principles and foundational questions it might raise.

Reflecting on Mr. Wistrøm's story from Bethlehem, there is, of course, much to learn from Dr. Adwan's wise methods of facilitating dialogue. However, Dr. Adwan's approach may represent more than just dialogue techniques. The previous assumptions about international collaboration seemed to miss a fundamental insight. As Mr. Wistrøm reflected on Dr. Adwan's facilitation in Bethlehem, he became increasingly intrigued about what the partnership in international collaboration demanded from him. Mr. Wistrøm had to engage more than the typical success factors from international projects would require, such as developing evidence-based measures for partnership quality. Not even a fair understanding of the context and living conditions of Palestine was enough. As we contemplate the seminar in Bethlehem and the recent developments in Palestine, we are left with questions about what it means to develop a university cooperation. Partnerships require something deeper and more existential, which is not easily articulated. Therefore, in this paper, we formulate a philosophical problem for further inquiry: *What is a good partnership in international collaboration?*

Before addressing this question from a practical or methodological perspective, we approach it as a philosophical inquiry. Rather than focusing solely on factual and formal requirements or instrumental quality measures, we argue that partnerships may depend on subtler, implicit dimensions that call for deeper exploration.

## Step 3: Theoretical and Philosophical Reflection: Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and a re-reading of the story

Wistrøm's experience can be explored as more than a personal experience – it can also be situated within broader theoretical and philosophical discussions. The encounter at the seminar in Bethlehem raised questions that extended beyond its immediate context – questions concerning key aspects of partnership development: knowledge, dialogue, and learning. In the following section, we juxtapose selected theoretical concepts on learning, knowl-

edge, and dialogue from Freire with Mr. Wistrøm's experiences at the Bethlehem seminar. While Freire does not explicitly address partnerships in international collaboration or higher education, his foundational perspectives on learning and dialogue might offer valuable insights that enrich our understanding of the challenges and potentials of developing international collaboration.

### **A) Conceptual entry point: Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed***

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1921–1997) advocates for a transformative and liberative approach to education, knowledge, and learning. Drawing on dialectical philosophies like those of Hegel and Marx, Freire holds that education draws on potential power dynamics and structural inequality in society. Freire's conceptual framework about learning moves beyond an inner, individual cognitive process and directs attention to the social aspects of education. Raising a criticism of the Western knowledge domain, Freire establishes a philosophical, methodological account for developing collective, moral action for social justice towards liberation. The participants can come to see the world “not as a static reality but as a reality in the process of transformation” (Macedo, 2005). Freire's work critically examines the role of education in society, positing that education holds the keys to social justice and societal change, or conversely, its opposites. Liberation, according to Freire, is not solely a matter of community development but challenges deep structures within the totality of society (Freire, 1978, p. 141).

Freire initiates his critique by challenging traditional classroom teaching. He introduces the concept of the “banking model” of teaching. In this traditional approach, teaching involves depositing information about various topics such as society, history, and politics into the students. According to Freire, students are perceived as passive and empty vessels, akin to a deposit or a “bank account”. The banking approach to teaching might pose significant threats to students' understanding, as, in Freire's words, “The student records, memorizes, and repeats these phrases without perceiving what four times four really means” (Freire 2005, p. 71).

The banking model, characterized by one-way teaching, also poses a danger to students, as knowledge about the world is treated as fixed and “ready-made”. This implies that students are relegated to the role of memorizing and learning without engaging in critical thinking. Consequently, the

foundational knowledge about society, history, and politics becomes settled, unconscious, and resistant to questioning.

According to Freire, the “banking model” of teaching not only preserves established knowledge but also embodies a conservative societal structure. His work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, illustrates how education can uphold social injustice, undermining autonomy and critical thinking. The oppression, as outlined by Freire, is not necessarily about any authoritarian personality of the teacher but is enacted in how the teachers perceive knowledge and convey it to their students. The failure to acknowledge students’ perspectives and life-worlds results in the students losing their freedom to think or speak, thereby being deprived of their human status. This dehumanization of students can lead to forms of violence (Freire, 2005, p. 44). Thus, social privileges, class divisions, and social injustice persist in this educational paradigm.

As an alternative to the banking model, Freire outlines the principles for what he presents as “education for liberation”. The main means of education for liberation is *dialogue*. For Freire, the dialogue represents both a philosophical account of dialectics as well as practical methodological steps toward liberation. On a philosophical level, the dialogue must build on the students’ subjective life-worlds. As opposed to fixed knowledge being conveyed in traditional teaching, true knowledge is founded on the reality of the students and local communities. Freire addresses a dialectic approach to knowledge, referring to Hegel (*ibid.*, p. 36) and Marx (*ibid.*, pp. 50–51): “To deny the importance of subjectivity in the process of transforming the world and history is naïve and simplistic. It is to admit the impossible: A world without people” (Freire, 2005, p. 50). Thus, the focus for education should be subjective and based on the lifeworld of the students and not only abstract knowledge with no relevance to the population. As a basis, education must take a dialectic starting point between the subjective and the collective living conditions.

Through the dialogue, Freire describes the field of education as “praxis”. The term “praxis” seems to bring forth the students’ living conditions (Freire, 2005, p. 141). The teacher acts as a “problem-poser”, whereas the teacher leads them to reflect on social, political, and economic contradictions (Freire, 2005, p. 80). Personal experiences of injustice can reveal common societal patterns where oppression is not merely a subjective feeling but an objective reality of oppression. It is not enough, though, that the oppressed liberate themselves. Also, the oppressor needs to discover himself to be an oppressor. Freire holds that it is not an aim to only display the

guilt; the oppressor needs to overcome abstract labels and take a position of solidarity. Referring to Hegel, the oppressor and the oppressed can become “beings for another” by taking risks as acts of love and fighting at the side of the oppressed to overcome injustice (Freire, 2005, p. 50).

At the core of Freire’s vision is a process called “conscientização”. Conscientização is the learning process of “perceiving social, political, and economic contradictions, and taking action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire, 2005, p. 36). Conscientização can be described as a dynamic and participatory process. The teacher leads a thematic investigation that aims to deepen awareness of social structure and to promote critical consciousness (Freire 2005, p. 109). The pedagogy of the oppressed can ideally work as an instrument for a critical discovery: Both the oppressed and their oppressors are manifestations of dehumanization. Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one (Freire, 2005, p. 50).

As a consequence, the students initiate an “inversion of praxis”, aiming to transform the existing conditions for the oppressed. Personal experience can reveal societal patterns of injustice, whereas oppression exceeds the individual and reaches towards insights about an objective reality, leading to solidarity. However, solidarity does not stop with an inner change but bears on commitment to *action*:

“True solidarity is found only in the plenitude of this act of love, in its existentiality, in its praxis. To affirm that men and women are persons and as persons should be free, and yet to do nothing tangible to make this affirmation a reality, is a farce.” (Freire, 2005, p. 50)

To Freire, action does not mean a practical activity but underscores the importance of an inner transformation as something existential and almost a revelation. In the next sections, we will reflect further on the development of a partnership, seeking the potential of Freire’s ideas and coupling it with Mr. Wistrøm’s intriguing insights taking place in a dialogue meeting in Bethlehem.

## **B) Reflecting upon the seminar in Bethlehem in the light of deliberative pedagogy**

The first focus of our reflection is on the dialogue and its potential implications for developing a partnership, which begins at the seminar in Bethlehem, where Dr. Adwan facilitates a dialogue between Israeli and Palestinian families.

Contrary to theories for the initial phases of successful collaborations (e.g., Jones et al., 2016), the partners should focus on aligning common aims and a rationale. However, the dialogue at the seminar in Bethlehem appears to foster more than any conceptual common adjustment; a much deeper and existential learning process seems to take place for both the Israeli/Palestinian participants and the international partners. Rather than seeking alignment, the dialogue aims to showcase the diversity and deep personal realities of family stories across generations. On an overall level, the Bethlehem dialogue creates a contrast to traditional one-way teaching methods, providing an opportunity to confront stereotypical interpretations of the Israeli and Palestinian narratives. Instead, Mr. Wistrøm and the participants gained exposure to widely different perspectives on the incidents in 1948.

### *Seeking comprehensive insights, not settled facts*

An essential aspect of the dialogue at the seminar in Bethlehem may lie in challenging the notion of history as a settled system of facts. Dr. Adwan had the option to conduct a seminar focused on presenting and clarifying the facts regarding the 1948 geography, incidents, political decisions, and stakeholders. However, Dr. Adwan chose to avoid this approach.

We believe that adopting a conventional “facts” approach would have hindered the dialogue between Israeli and Palestinian partners. In the Palestinian/Israeli context, the very issue of strategic presentation of facts is a deeply sensitive issue. In schools in Palestine and Israel, textbooks present significantly different versions of history, geography, and each other’s culture and religion. At the seminar in Bethlehem, the challenge was how to engage in a meeting of clashing stories and realities without causing a collapse of communication.

Using Freire’s terminology, the textbooks may be an example of “banking knowledge”, where knowledge is typically presented in a singular, fixed way. Addressing the sensitive topic of the incidents of 1948, Dr. Adwan successfully facilitated a peaceful dialogue, acknowledging the evident high risks of misunderstandings on each side. For Mr. Wistrøm, as a newcomer, engaging in dialogue served as an effective introduction to the occupation and the sufferings of the Palestinian people without imposing truths and facts on him.

While Freire primarily directed his criticisms towards Western knowledge, the issue of presenting knowledge and maintaining a fixed discourse is also relevant in Palestine. Education and the use of textbooks have played

a strategic and dominating role in mediating deeply contested facts about belonging and the legitimization of power (Mazawi, 2016).

*Dialogue: The power of personal stories and the temptation of distance*

Another powerful aspect of the dialogue is that the families' stories are subjective and not objective. In the moment, the subjective might have been the key to proximity and intimacy between strangers at the seminar in Bethlehem, despite deep and insolvable conflict. As Mr. Wistrøm participates in the seminar, the complexity of the individual families' stories displays a deep conflict. The subjective plays a key part in his process of realizing the complicated nature of the conflict. Similar to many Norwegians, he had previously observed the situation in Palestine as a local "conflict" that the parties should solve internally and end fighting (Tveit, 2023). Mr. Wistrøm admits a desire for brief solutions and "that it is possible to end or reduce the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians through dialogue and by getting to know each other".

The temptation to maintain a certain distance from complex issues is understandable and perhaps comfortable. However, according to Freire, such an approach represents a form of denial: "To deny the importance of subjectivity in the process of transforming the world and history is naïve and simplistic. It is to admit the impossible: A world without people" (Freire, 2005, p. 50). Dr. Adwan's approach involves facilitating a dialogue that starts with the personal stories of three generations of Palestinians or Israelis. Instead of aiming at ending or reducing conflict, Dr. Adwan makes a brave move: He invites the Palestinian families to include Israelis in their family stories and display their agony and sorrow.

During the seminar in Bethlehem, Mr. Wistrøm gained a new understanding of his own limitations in international collaboration. Through active participation and attentive listening, he comes to understand and realize the process of humanization: "You do not fully understand or realize the concept of discrimination if you have not experienced – seen, experienced yourself, or met a human who has been discriminated [against] – how this impacts a human being." He recognises the limitation of abstract slogans of peace or hopes for quick solutions and an end to conflict in Palestine and Israel. Instead, Mr. Wistrøm undergoes a change of perspective.

*Becoming rocked*

Mr. Wistrøm expresses that he was moved from a comfortable state into a state of being "rocked". With the vocabulary of Freire, Mr. Wistrøm under-

goes a process of “consientização” at the Bethlehem seminar. He experiences a moment of truth and change. The impossibility of the participants meeting again creates an insight: The division between Palestinians and Israelis appears as a deep and inevitable truth. For Mr. Wistrøm, this “consientização” – Mr. Wistrøm’s realization that the Palestinians and the Israelis could not meet again – appeared to be a crucial insight – in Mr. Wistrøm’s own words, a necessary “imperative realization of facts”.

This realization can be described by what Freire (2005, p. 50) calls a “childbirth, and a painful one.” The aspirations for development, change, and progress fall short and take unexpected detours. Thus, the Bethlehem seminar can be described as existential: for Mr. Wistrøm, the seminar represents what is also labelled a “pedagogy of discomfort”, where the learning process provides insights into suffering rather than learning as mastery (Blignaut & Koopman, 2020; Head, 2020). The stories evoke his compassion, engagement, and deep sympathy. Yet, the stories also reveal the pain of gaining insights and knowledge from the situation of the Palestinian people. For Mr. Wistrøm, the “consientização” also involves pain in another way: the pain when realizing the limitations of a complete understanding. One could assume that true compassion depends on a true identification, where Mr. Wistrøm had to be a Palestinian to understand the situation in Palestine. In doing so, the pain might lie in the conflicted position between the objective “realization of facts” and his own subjective position. Yet, Freire describes no “true understanding” or solidarity in terms of objective sameness. Instead, for Freire, the true sources for solidarity lie in a dialectical relation between the subjective and the objective (Freire, 2005, p. 51). There are no quick fixes through partnerships, no immediate remedies for the deep conflicts and injustices.

However, the moment of “consientização” does not paralyse him. Instead, it became a turning point for Mr. Wistrøm. The seminar in Bethlehem appears to *inspire action*, commitment, and engagement. When Freire describes “praxis”, he refers to the “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 2005, p. 51). The insight might have woken Mr. Wistrøm to solidarity alongside Palestinians. Consequently, Mr. Wistrøm has participated in missions for education in emergencies in Palestine and initiated several university partnerships between himself in Norway and Dr. Adwan in Palestine, which, throughout the past decade, also included all the authors of this paper. However, a strong partnership is also that our projects aim not only for a transformation in Palestine but also for a reciprocal exchange and change (Tadesse & Melese, 2021). On a practical level,

this means that we ensure parallel development projects at our universities in Palestine *and* Norway. However, it also demands a willingness for the universities to undertake a deeper work of reciprocal exchange where the Norwegian partners also develop insights and perspectives from the Palestinian experiences. This aligns with Freire’s emphasis on dialogue and mutual learning, moving beyond a “banking model” of knowledge transfer to a dialectical approach between subjective and collective living conditions. Referring to Hegel, Freire has the vision that the oppressor and the oppressed can become “beings for another” by taking risks as acts of love and fighting at the side of the oppressed to overcome injustice (Freire, 2005, p. 50). Any exchange, in any project, will not just result in measurable outputs, such as a new master’s programme or course. For us, it also involves steady work in developing dialogues with the university management, hoping for the result of an *institutional solidarity* that exceeds our personal engagement.

### **What is “the good” in a partnership international collaboration?**

In this paper, we reflect on what the development of a good partnership in international collaboration might entail, with a focus on the conditions for establishing a partnership between Norway and Palestine. Over the past decade, the Middle East, and Palestine in particular, has faced escalating conflicts, culminating in the devastating and ongoing war – with horrors difficult to fathom for any outside partner. In such a context, developing partnerships may be more important than ever. As international collaboration continues to serve as a key resource for quality development, stabilization, and a hopeful future, seeking a mutual understanding across contexts is crucial.

The next question is what this mutual understanding demands in the development of a partnership in international collaboration. This reflective research paper takes a starting point in a personal experience told by Mr. Wistrøm, who attended a dialogue seminar between Palestinian and Israeli families in Bethlehem. The seminar represents a key moment of insight, where Mr. Wistrøm is confronted with former superficial explanations and ideals about the Palestinian situation. He undergoes a so-called “imperative realization of facts” – *conscientização* – about the deep division between Palestinians and Israelis. This moment, though painful, became a turning point, inspiring action and a driving force for the development of several



partnership projects between Palestine and Norway. From this critical reflection, we can propose that partnerships may require gaining reflexive insights about confronting one's own limitations and being ready to engage.

In this reflective paper, several open questions remain. First and foremost, the question about how to develop a good partnership is not a matter of fulfilling instrumental quality standards in international collaboration, although they, too, might be valuable. Instead, we can change the focus slightly, asking about *what the good is* when developing partnerships in international collaboration.

Another question concerns the power imbalances between the Global North-South relationship as a mutual partnership. All three authors of this paper reject the thought of Norway as a “white saviour” (Straubhaar, 2014), yet the underlying premises of funding and power subtexts of partnerships are inherent tensions underlying all the activities. However, the contribution of this paper might lie in how we as partners act upon these realities: On the one hand, the development of a good partnership demands an acknowledgement of our limitations and our continuous need for learning. Building partnerships between Norway and Palestine entails recognising that we will never fully grasp the lived realities of our Palestinian colleagues. Or the other way around. Perhaps the secret is not to strive for complete understanding but to embrace the insight that our *knowledge is partial*.

On the other hand, the acknowledgement of limitations also requires something from our Palestinian partner. Developing a good partnership will also demand *a sense of acceptance of the partial*. This acceptance represents an undefined “good” force, as it involves patience and a willingness to interpret suggestions and assertions in the best way possible.

Many questions remain about how to develop a good partnership in international collaboration. Partnerships inevitably involve uncertainties, differences, and partiality that all partners must navigate. While some may prefer to avoid the discomfort, misunderstandings, and time-consuming online meetings, the partners in this and many other successful projects appear to endure this. In ways that we sense rather than comprehend, we might describe this commitment as a *professional calling* (Duffy, Dik et al., 2018). This calling serves as a driving force that nurtures the good in a partnership despite power imbalances and equips us with patience and resilience, and even makes us and our universities eager to face the next challenges or threats together.

## Notes

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- <sup>2</sup> Øyvind Wistrøm, Emeritus Assistant Professor at the University of South-Eastern Norway. Political/pedagogical activist and environmentalist. He has taught natural science, including environmental questions and international politics in teacher education, partly based on his own experiences. He has also worked for UNESCO in Palestine/Gaza and for UNICEF in Ukraine during the current war. Established and headed a number of co-operation projects with universities in Palestine and Ukraine. Wistrøm has also worked on democracy and action research on environmental education and is currently Vice-chair of the Grandparents Climate Campaign in Norway.
- <sup>3</sup> Sami Adwan, a Palestinian professor in education leadership and teachers' education, worked in many local and international universities, and currently, after formally retiring, I teach as a lecturer at the Arab American University. Published extensively both research papers and books in the fields of education, early childhood, schoolbooks, religious education, and peace education. Held many administrative positions including Academic Vice President for Academic Affairs at Hebron University and dean of the school of education at Bethlehem University. Supervised many local and international PhD and MA dissertations. A unionist and a member of the Board of Trustees of Al-Quds Open University.
- <sup>4</sup> In honour and remembrance of our co-coordinator, Dr. Ibrahim Al-Astal, who was killed in an attack on Gaza in 2023.
- <sup>5</sup> In the past decade, the three authors have collaborated in two projects financed by the Norwegian government: EURASIA CPEA-LT-2017–10037 Developing democracy education in Ukraine, Norway and Palestine (2017–2021), and NORPART-2018–10166 Developing early childhood education in Palestine and Norway (2018–2025).
- <sup>6</sup> The Oslo Accords refer to a series of agreements between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the period 1993–94. These agreements were designed to initiate a peace process for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by mutually negotiating a two-state solution. (Britannica, 2024).
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## CHAPTER 7: INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION AND WORKPLACE FRIENDSHIPS

Åsmund Aamaas<sup>1</sup> & Vaibhav Jadhav<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

*This chapter builds on a concrete experience from an international collaboration in teacher education between India and Norway, Savitribai Phule Pune University (SPPU) and the University of South-Eastern Norway (USN). It is an experience of international collaboration outside university premises, marked by encouragement and doubts, and the beginning of a workplace friendship. The authors, two junior academic faculty members at that time, went to the market together. The experience happened at a crucial time for us and the project. Internal and external pressures could have easily led us to withdraw from the collaboration. We experienced place-based learning, which allowed us to explore the market together and discuss real-life and educational challenges and possibilities. Discussing global citizenship and sharing professional and personal knowledge and experiences in the marketplace was inspirational and made sense to us. This marked the beginning of a workplace friendship that contributed to sustaining and expanding the collaboration between SPPU and USN.*

### Keywords

*Reflective practice research, Place-based learning, Workplace friendship, Global Citizenship, Internationalization.*

### Introduction

Savitribai Phule Pune University (SPPU) and the University of South-Eastern Norway (USN) have a longstanding collaboration. The first contact was made in 2005 when two Norwegian teacher educators approached SPPU to look for a common interest in the internationalization of teacher education. This was not the first example of collaboration between USN and the Indian educational sector. Since 1997, USN has collaborated with

schools located three hours' drive from SPPU. In 2005, the move was made to seek collaboration with SPPU, a renowned Indian university. The first meeting between USN and SPPU marked the beginning of a longstanding partnership. Twenty years later, the collaboration in teacher education is more extensive than ever. This is a rare case of two universities from Norway and India finding common ground for a multifaceted and long-standing partnership, including student and staff mobility, as well as joint research activities. This chapter examines the significance of workplace friendships and place-based experiences in the internationalization of teacher education.

The internationalization of higher education has received increased attention over the last few decades, especially since the Bologna process in Europe (1999) and the University turn in teacher education came into effect. The collaboration between USN and SPPU directly resulted from an increased focus on internationalization, mobility, and joint research in teacher education. The leadership at both universities committed themselves to the idea of internationalization and agreed that an institutional partnership could enhance the quality and relevance of the educational programmes on both sides.

The authors of this chapter have been involved in the collaboration since 2012 (Åsmund) and 2014 (Vaibhav). At that time, the respective USN–SPPU collaboration leads, who were, the pro-rector, and the dean invited us to join the team. Both leaders actively sought their colleagues' involvement in the collaboration and welcomed new initiatives in teacher education and beyond (Duesund & Aasland, 2023). October 2014 was the first time we, the authors, talked together at SPPU. Vaibhav was aware of the collaboration, its educational activities, and its success stories. Project activities primarily took place in the department's meeting rooms. Vaibhav regularly observed faculty at SPPU having discussions with international visitors from Norway, and Åsmund was usually one of them. In October 2014, Vaibhav was called to the meeting room and introduced to Åsmund. This marked the beginning of a close collaboration.

The method of reflexive practice research used in this chapter was first developed by Lindseth (2009) and later expanded upon by scholars such as Weiss and Helskog (2023). The method is used to make sense of and learn from one's own experiences in an open-minded and reflective way which goes beyond the individual experience. The three stages of reflective practice research provide a space first to explore a concrete experience(s) and critically discuss what is at stake in the example(s) before theoretically re-

flecting on them. The three stages of this phenomenological-hermeneutical approach facilitate the uncovering of meaning in lived experiences (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004).

In this chapter and through the three stages of reflexive practice research, we will explore possibilities connected to internationalization in teacher education. The chapter starts with a concrete experience from our international collaboration. It is an experience of internationalization outside the meeting room, marked by encouragement and doubts, and the beginning of workplace friendships. In the second stage, we critically discuss our experience, drawing out the core themes of our individual and shared experiences. In this context, we will focus on what was at stake: our motivation for being a part of the collaboration and the significance of visiting the marketplace together, which opened our hearts and minds towards future collaboration and experiences. In the final stage, we reflect theoretically on our experience, focusing on workplace friendships, place-based learning, and global citizenship.

Overall, this chapter can be read as a meta-reflection on our first collaboration experience, which might have implications for understanding internationalization in higher education, the importance of workplace friendships, and how to integrate place-based education and global citizenship into international projects in teacher education.

## **The experience – the beginning of a workplace friendship**

Vaibhav: That day in October was the first time in my life that I talked with foreign faculty at SPPU. I cannot believe I contentiously spoke with him and explained my research and academic career. I observed that Åsmund was keenly listening and wished for future success for me. This experience was new to me because I had recently started my career at the university. I remember meeting Åsmund at the lunch table the same day. During lunch, Åsmund told me his wish to visit the market. Suddenly, the two of us decided on a plan for a visit to the market in downtown Pune. We went to the market for exploration. It was the beginning of the Diwali season, and the entire market looked shiny and pleasant. He asked a few questions about the Diwali function, and I replied to all of them with delight. He listened to me very carefully.

Åsmund voiced his wish to purchase some Diwali lights for his home.

Accordingly, we explored the market and discussed crackers and lights. He



made very keen observations and even asked questions about the manufacturing company of the Diwali lights; he probably saw that the materials were made in China. I was worried about the quality and other trade and local production issues. Much discussion happened healthily. Finally, we purchased some lights for his home, and the shopping was completed successfully.

During this visit, he asked me about my specialization in research. A few weeks earlier, I visited UNESCO Bangkok for a workshop on global citizenship education. Suddenly, I replied that my research area was global citizenship education. I felt a bit nervous because I was new to this field, but when discussing it with Åsmund, I felt more comfortable in this area. He was very positive about my work and suggested that I should pursue the topic of teacher education and global citizenship. I felt inspired to continue working in the field.

Åsmund: I remember going to the market with Vaibhav during Diwali. It was very exciting. The Diwali lights were everywhere. It was the first time we really talked together. I was excited. It was easy to talk with Vaibhav. He explained many things, exciting things. I even bought some lights to bring back home with me. I asked Vaibhav for suggestions on what kind of lights to buy. Vaibhav explained to me why lights are used during Diwali and how his family celebrates with lights and sweets. Even the main dishes are sweet during Diwali! Vaibhav bought the lights for me. He insisted. This was after I decided to buy the more expensive light chain. Was I supposed to accept? He also gave me some other things important for celebrating Diwali. It almost felt like he had invited me to celebrate Diwali in Norway. I shared my thoughts on the Diwali celebration, which shares similarities with the Christmas celebration in Norway, focusing on family, good food, gifts, and many people visiting churches. At the same time, I felt confused. It felt like a dilemma. I decided to accept the gifts. I think he said something like, Guests are gods in India. I was unsure if I understood everything correctly. I felt this was not the last time we would go to the market together.

Being stuck in traffic together and walking the market together felt inspiring. I felt able to ask questions related to our shared experience. I had been travelling to India a few times and felt we were a bit stuck discussing statistics and numbers in small conference rooms. The lights at the market sparked exciting talks about his area of research. It felt right to talk about personal issues and global citizenship with him in that context. Vaibhav talked about the inspiration he took from a recent visit to a UNESCO workshop. In the atmosphere of India's most important Hindu festival, I believe

we both felt a connection through our shared interest in global questions within a local context. I felt fortunate to engage in in-depth conversations about the challenges that need to be addressed in society and education. To me, it felt like the beginning of something. We decided to meet the next day for an early morning walk.

## **Critical reflections**

At the marketplace, Vaibhav experienced that people from other countries can be curious about Indian culture and festivals. It was the first time he spent time in Pune with international guests. He had recently been visiting a UNESCO workshop abroad. The workshop provided him with the opportunity to travel and gain academic inspiration. Vaibhav was inspired by the dimensions of learning presented by UNESCO, which focuses on the cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioural aspects of global citizenship education. He found the idea of connecting people across borders to broaden everyone's perspective to be appealing. Still, Vaibhav was not convinced that internationalization and global citizenship were worth investing much effort in his academic career. At the same time, Åsmund struggled with motivation; he was convinced that internationalization was important but felt frustrated by discussing the same numbers and tables for his third visit. He was more interested in discussing real-life experiences in an international context and exploring how to incorporate them into teacher education. Two topics were at stake here: the future of our commitment to the SPPU-USN cooperation and the relevance of the collaboration for our teacher education programmes. We both felt inspired at the market to start thinking about how to involve each other in our future work in teacher education. We found that the topics we discussed and the learning environment we shared were important.

## **Workplace friendship**

The friendly, confusing, and open dialogue at the marketplace became important to us and the future of our collaboration. Could the beginning of a workplace friendship be a reason why we consider this collaboration still relevant many years later? The visit to the marketplace laid the foundation for a new friendship, both academically and personally. During our shared educational experience, we talked about human values and global trade in

the context of the upcoming Diwali celebration. The visit gave us an experience of respect towards each other's culture and feelings. We discussed the divine importance of light during Diwali and the production of light chains in China. The conversation sparked discussions about Diwali, lights, trade, China, Christmas, India, and Norway. The dialogue focused on the principles of Global Citizenship Education (UNESCO, 2020). We felt a real bond. When Åsmund inquired about purchasing the lights and requested a two-metre-long chain, Vaibhav replied that a one-metre chain would be sufficient. Vaibhav's concern was the quality of the lights. Åsmund, on the other hand, was more focused on the cost of the lights after realising that he would not be allowed to pay for it himself. This negotiation and shared experience allowed us to discuss topics such as education, culture, society, and trade that Åsmund and Vaibhav had not previously encountered in Pune. At the same time, the discussion left both in a state of confusion. Could the different perspectives on buying lights become problematic when more is at stake?

Our interest in each other's academic work was equally important to the contingent and shared experience. Especially important to Vaibhav was that Åsmund showed much interest in the UNESCO workshop, which Vaibhav had completed only a few weeks earlier on global citizenship education. Vaibhav was surprised that a researcher from Norway listened to him very carefully and asked numerous questions regarding global citizenship education and his perspectives on how this could be incorporated into education more broadly, specifically in Indian teacher education. The dialogue brought a sense of shared interest in the academic relationship. This sparked a conversation about further collaborations and projects. The sustainability of our involvement in the collaboration was at stake.

Three years after visiting the market, Vaibhav and Åsmund became team members in a new SPPU-USN project. Åsmund took the initiative to include global citizenship education as one of the main focus areas. Vaibhav felt this was the best single example of recognition and understanding he had ever experienced in an academic collaboration simply because Åsmund remembered and acknowledged his area of interest years later.

### *Place-based learning*

When visiting the market, Åsmund searched for renewed motivation and purpose. He felt that many days spent discussing quantitative data in conference rooms took some of the curiosity out of the collaboration. Perhaps

the coordinator on the Indian side felt the need to create a new momentum in the collaboration and to include Vaibhav. At the marketplace, we developed a sense of community by experiencing a place and trying to make sense of it together. We discussed both the academic and cultural aspects of the experience. Especially for Åsmund, it was very refreshing to have these conversations outside the university grounds. It allowed us to speak openly, not to become restricted by formalities and get trapped in the idea of doing more of what we already did because this is the way things are done. Together, we developed a hope that we could contribute to increasing the focus on global citizenship in our educational programmes. Motivation and hope were at stake, perhaps also the continuation of our project.

## **Theoretical reflections**

The collaboration in teacher education between SPPU and USN is extensive. It encompasses both online and on-site teaching and learning activities, as well as joint research. Students travel both ways on short courses, placements, and semester exchanges. Virtual mobility is facilitated through webinars and guest lectures. Staff mobility is extensive, encompassing development and research work, as well as organising workshops and facilitating student mobility. Today, we serve as the coordinators of the SPPU-USN collaboration in teacher education, which keeps us quite busy. We are usually in contact weekly, and during periods of joint courses and research activities, we communicate daily. According to Leask & Bridge (2013), the academic staff involved in internationalization are the most central actors in the projects. At the same time, there is a need for more research on individual reasons for engagement (Dewey & Duff, 2009). In a more recent study focusing on an international research project in higher education, Dusdal and Powell (2021) argue that:

Beyond broadening knowledge, the considerable benefits deriving from the project, a perhaps surprising result is the social significance of team members' friendships, the reinforcement of existing relationships, and networking. Thus, this social dimension should not be marginalized in future analyses of research collaboration. (p. 242)

The following section focuses on workplace friendships, place-based education, and global citizenship.

### ***Workplace friendship***

The *belongingness hypothesis* developed by Baumeister and Leary (1995) argues that people “are fundamentally and pervasively motivated by a need to belong, that is, by a strong desire to form and maintain enduring interpersonal attachments” (p. 522). Workplace friendships appear to be important across various contexts, with both advantages and pitfalls. In the Indian context, classical literature emphasises the importance of friendship, with the story of Krishna and Arjuna being a prime example. Krishna and Arjuna discuss their duties to human beings. This is the classic example of *Sakhya*. Krishna says, “Let it be understood that Arjuna is one half of my body” and that we are really “one self that has been made twofold” (Parekh, 2008). To many modern-day Indians, this unity, friendship, and sense of obligation to work together guide them in pursuing their goals.

According to Morrison and Cooper-Thomas (2016), the fundamental objective of friendships in a workplace setting is to support emotional and relational well-being. Other research suggests that friendships and a sense of belonging associated with the workplace may lead to increased engagement with work (Riordan & Griffeth, 1995), innovative behaviour (Durrah, 2023), enhanced motivation (Bergin & Bergin, 2009), and psychological safety (Zhang et al., 2010). Psychological safety might lower the barriers to contributing with ideas and taking action to implement these (Edmondson & Lei, 2014); it might enhance the information and knowledge flows (Siemens et al., 2009), make it less threatening and increase the motivation to share knowledge (Zhao et al., 2016) and be important for creating a culture of suggesting changes and improvements (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). Nielsen (2000) demonstrated that employees in workplaces where friendships are more likely to occur are less likely to quit their jobs.

Jadhav and Salunke (2011) argue that workplace friendships in teacher education institutions in India reduce vulnerability and encourage adaptability and humility, which are essential for success in the workplace and achieving targets. The community of teachers must come together to create plans for their learners, which is vital for the overall development of learners and, in turn, the development of society. In addition, friendships at the workplace can boost job satisfaction and professional pleasure, even though they might lead to increased work orientation and not necessarily release from the stern demands of duty, which are often characterised by other forms of close relations and friendships (Jadhav & Salunke, 2011).

Other studies on workplace friendships have shown no effect or even risks. According to Gupta (2020), while positive effects might be found in the global north, developing countries like India might find themselves in a different position. Friendships that cross the boundaries of the hierarchy can cause negative reactions among colleagues. Contrary to other studies shown above, Akila and Priyadarshini (2018) found that in an Indian context, “friendships do not affect the degree of organizational commitment and intention to leave” (p. 5). Furthermore, Kunday (2014) found that workplace friendships could lead to additional work for the sake of friendship with colleagues of different ranks. In a study from the Netherlands, Ellwardt, Steglich, and Wittek (2012) found that gossip may lead to workplace friendships; however, high levels of gossip activity may have the opposite effect. Morrison and Nolan (2007) found in their study from Australia that workplace friendships could lead to “blurring of boundaries; having to devote time to the friendship; and distraction from work can create numerous difficulties” (p. 32). In a study from Norway, Brunstad (2022) argues that good leadership requires a high level of awareness about inclusion, transparency, and community, as well as the importance of providing equal space and opportunities to all. In this context, workplace friendships can pose a risk.

A report written by Duesund and Aasland (2023) about the collaboration between SPPU and USN, based on their own experiences and interviews, highlights that one success factor behind the long-lasting collaboration between SPPU and USN was “close relations between participants from the two countries, both on an academic and private level [and that] this seems to be crucial for building trust and sustaining the collaboration” (p. 11). This supports the findings of Dusdal & Powell (2021), stating that “for complex international projects, teamwork is challenging; thus, necessary trust – including support and friendship – is crucial, especially beyond the official project duration, to complete publications and design follow-up projects” (p. 243). Ma and Montgomery (2019) propose that “linking the strategic and contingent through interpersonal relationships [...] build[s] sustainable international partnerships” (p. 30).

In our opinion, our workplace friendship is relevant. Our experience serves as an example of the importance of interpersonal relationships in international projects. As coordinators, we have received massive support and some criticism. To facilitate and increase student and staff mobility, we have challenged institutional structures and ways of organising internationalization at our institutions. We have spent many evenings and nights working

on the collaboration, more than our leaders would have allowed, a situation not unknown in the university sector. It has been time-consuming, but it was worth it to us. Our workplace friendships have been an encouragement and a valuable resource. However, our collaboration is not a two-man show. With support from leadership and an institutional Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) as a basis, and with a team of colleagues from both sides participating in the project as a necessity, we found our shared motivation to coordinate the collaboration on shared goals and experiences. Acknowledging the risks, including the potential for oversimplifying our different contexts, we will argue that the workplace friendship that developed from our first meeting at the marketplace had a positive impact on our future collaboration and joint projects.

### *Place-based experience.*

Our shared experience took place at the market; we believe this made a significant difference. Strolling around the market, our conversations were interrupted by the busy environment; real life was present, and questions came naturally, as there was much to explore and discuss. The walk-and-talk method is sometimes used for interviewing people; it “connects a person’s narrative with the place, with the space where it is narrated” (Pranka, 2020, p. 2). Our experience was nothing like an interview, but we did experience some of the benefits of the walk-and-talk method. Leaving the meeting room behind, focusing on the place and shared experience opened a space to share knowledge and ask questions relevant to real-world challenges in a local context. This has many similarities to place-based education (PBE). In many ways, PBE might be seen as a response to a lack of attention given to place in educational activities.

In PBE, learners explore a place with all their senses. It is an authentic, hands-on approach to problem-solving and critically engaging with the surroundings to enrich learning. Khadka et al. (2020) argue that PBE “is designed to enhance appreciation for the natural environment and to stimulate citizenship” (p. 80). Lowenstein et al. (2018) suggest implementing PBE in teacher education, as it allows for a “significant shift in thinking and practice around learning, teaching, and community” (p. 36). McInerney et al. (2011) suggest that learners using PBE, in their case, young people, should be encouraged to think holistically and:

... to connect local issues to global environmental, financial, and social concerns, such as climate change, water scarcity, poverty, and trade. It invites

teachers and students to question the established order, view things from the most disadvantaged position, and work for the common good. (p. 11)

Corbett (2020) rightly argues that PBE “is a powerful, generative, and yet inherently problematic educational idea that demands critical interrogation, particularly in the current global climate of inward-looking nationalist and place-based politics” (p. 1). PBE is usually used to learn in a local context. A recent study by Aamaas et al. (Forthcoming) has demonstrated that PBE can also be beneficial in an international context, especially when some participants are local. An advantage of taking PBE out of context and placing it in an international setting is the inherent widening of perspectives.

Webber et al. (2021) highlight the risks associated with PBE in reproducing Western value systems. They question whether PBE has the potential to challenge exploitation or “is only one more method to engage students in learning curricular content” (p. 23). Perhaps the Indian philosopher and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore can inspire us to challenge the curricular content and ways of teaching and learning. He suggests that learning is most effective when surrounded by trees and nature. To Tagore, nature meant not only hills and mountains, valleys and forests, mountain streams and quiet lakes; they were symbols of a living presence which for him was both intensely real and spiritual (Mukherjee, 1970). One of the ancient Indian education systems emerged from the Vedas. The Rishis, the Guru or teacher, focused on conversation-based education for learning and understanding the content (Srivastava, Atreya & Sharma, 2022). Gurus called their disciples or learners to preach in an environment free from the walls of a building, in nature. Learners accompanied the Guru to various places. In Vedic philosophy, listening is fundamental, but dialogue, debate, discussion, and sightseeing were also adopted as teaching methods in the Vedic education system (Pammi, 2017).

Our encounter at the market was important for broadening our perspectives and developing a sense of workplace friendship in a context exciting and new to Åsmund and familiar and safe to Vaibhav. This might be seen in the light of another success factor put forward by Duesund and Aasland (2023) in their report about the longstanding SPPU-USN collaboration, where they highlight the importance of “developing an understanding of each other’s culture and traditions” and that “arrangements have been made to spend time getting to know the context and local communities” (p. 11). Our experience in the market suggests that place-based learning and PBE

can play a crucial role in strengthening ties through shared experiences.



This has also strengthened our focus on PBE in student mobility and faculty collaboration between SPPU and USN. The method has enabled us to learn more about each other and ourselves and to explore global and local challenges in situ.

### *Global citizenship*

At the marketplace, Vaibhav told Åsmund about his recent visit to Bangkok. In Thailand, he attended a workshop focused on global citizenship education. Global citizenship education highlights three complementary and intertwined dimensions of learning: cognitive, social, and emotional and behavioural (UNESCO, 2021). Global citizenship is also an integral part of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are crucial across various educational contexts. SDG, target 4.7, gives direction:

By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and culture's contribution to sustainable development. (United Nations, n.d.)

Global citizenship education aims to empower all learners worldwide to come together and work for sustainable futures in their specific contexts. The International Commission on the Futures of Education published its report, "Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education", in 2021. The report states, "[...] despite the urgency of action, and in conditions of great uncertainty, we have reason to be full of hope" (p. 6). The report argues that this hope is evident in the increasing access to knowledge and tools that enable collaboration across contexts and has great potential "for engaging humanity in creating better futures together" (p. 6). Of course, collaboration alone is not enough. The report has been criticised for being naïve and lacking an understanding of challenges such as power relations (Elfert & Morris, 2022). Others have argued that critical hope might be necessary "to avoid succumbing to fatalism in imagining global social justice" (Tarozzi, 2023, p. 52).

To us, our collaboration has been important for exploring and learning more about global citizenship. Our collaboration led us to expand our understanding of cultures, languages, and power relations and develop in-

tercultural skills. The title of our joint SPPU-USN project, Teacher Education for Sustainable Futures in India and Norway (2020–2025), reflects our common goal to enhance the quality and relevance of teacher education through internationalization focused on SDGs and its inherent focus on social justice, culture's contributions to sustainable development, global citizenship, and reflective practice research.

Our first meeting at the marketplace gave direction to our future collaboration. We were inspired to move away from solely teaching about global citizenship and culture and instead incorporate methods such as place-based education into our teaching and learning environments. Furthermore, our collaboration provided us with access to a wide range of new learning environments, including international webinars and student mobilities. The SPPU-USN cooperation brings people together across contexts, Global citizenship education aims to strengthen a sense of belonging to a common humanity, where we all share rights and responsibilities for our shared future, thereby fostering social and emotional learning (UNESCO, 2021). In our projects, we strive to gain a deeper understanding, broaden our perspective, and think critically about the interconnectedness and interdependence of different places, countries, societies, and populations. Action competence is crucial in following up on the SDGs; together, we discuss, explore, and develop teaching methods and ideas for working towards sustainable futures in education. In many ways, this aligns well with UNESCO's proposed three dimensions of global citizenship: cognitive, social, and emotional and behavioural (UNESCO, 2021).

## **Our journey from the marketplace**

In 2014, we were both seeking meaning in our collaboration. We were both aware of the climate emissions associated with internationalization, the time constraints on both sides, potential administrative hurdles, and the risk of becoming politicised and reinforcing power structures. Acknowledging these dangers, we decided to continue our collaboration, believing in the potential positive impact on students, colleagues, and ourselves. Teacher resilience might help us to understand our decisions. Clarà (2016) argues that situations of perceived crisis can be “reappraised by teachers in ways that allow them to transit from states of suffering and despair to states of restored well-being and commitment” (p. 82). Our situation might not have been adverse *per se*. However, the accumulated internal and external pres-

tures might have led us to stop participating in the collaboration without a sense of workplace friendship, shared real-life experiences, and a sense of purpose and hope in continuing our collaboration.

Our shared experience at the marketplace gave us hope that sustaining and expanding our collaboration was both possible and needed. Together with our colleagues, we agreed that internationalization matters. We agreed that there was a need for a change in our teacher education programmes to foster closer partnerships across borders, contributing towards more sustainable futures. Recognising power structures in education and elsewhere, we also saw hope in the transformative power of working together. Reflective practice research has provided us with a tool to understand our experiences better. It made sense for us to embark on a joint venture to strengthen our focus on education for sustainable futures and global citizenship.

## Notes

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## CHAPTER 8: WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING COINCIDENCES

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### Abstract

In this essay, we take our point of departure in one of the authors' concrete experiences from trying to help a minor refugee to education and a decent life. In rather coincidental ways, educational opportunities opened for the teenager, and opportunities for longstanding international collaboration opened up for her. Using a philosophical reflective practice research approach, this author first narrates some of these experiences. Then the three authors reflect critically upon the narrative, drawing out seven patterns of coincidences that made them all wonder. They have further reflected theoretically upon the coincidences, interpreting them respectively as possible events of *synchronicity*, *intuition*, and *divine guidance*.

### Key words

*Internationalization, International Collaboration, Reflective Practice Research, Synchronicity, Intuition, Divine guidance*

### Introduction

“Where can the Kid get a visa without too much trouble?” This was the question Guro, the first-person voice in the narrative of this essay (see the concrete reflection section), asked herself while the terrified parentless ‘Kid’ – let us call him that<sup>4</sup> – was waiting to be deported from Europe to the capital of his Muslim-majority birth country<sup>5</sup>. In handcuffs and escorted by two giant policemen, the teenager would be flown out of Europe and left alone in a shabby hotel with a small sum of money that was supposed to get him going. Guro had promised that she would do her best to help him.

Hence, this essay tells the story of how Guro tried to help the Kid to an education and a decent life. To secure true reflectivity, intersubjectivity, and



multi-perspectivity, the narrative in the concrete reflection section has been examined by our team of three authors. It is reflected upon using a philosophical approach in terms of reflective practice research as conceptualized by Anders Lindseth (2015), which again is grounded in phenomenology (see e.g. Husserl, 1950; Heidegger, 1975; Ricoeur, 1984) and hermeneutics (see i.e. Gadamer, 1993). Moreover, our methodology is inspired by the broad field of reflective practice (see, i.e. Bradbury et al., 2009) as well as action research (see e.g. Reason and Bradbury, 2008). The reflective research and essay structure suggested by Lindseth (2015) is to begin with a first-person narration in the form of concrete reflection. Her experiences involved a series of seemingly coincidental experiences that we in the critical reflection section interpret by drawing out seven patterns of interlinked incidents and events, which made them wonder, some of them happening many years apart. Then follows a theoretical reflection section where we try to understand the patterns of coincidences from three different epistemological perspectives, namely a post-materialist scientific perspective, a humanistic perspective, and a theological perspective. Based on these perspectives, the coincidences are interpreted respectively as possible events of *synchronicity*, *intuition*, and *divine guidance*, without drawing any absolute conclusions, simply because we cannot know for sure what is at play in Guro's rather mysterious experiences together with others.

Yet, the art of reflective practice research demands of the researcher that he or she is able to draw out the implicit seeds of practical knowledge and wisdom inherent in experience and, to the extent possible, make them explicit for the reader to see. In the process, the seeds might grow into flourishing in the researcher as well as in the readers. With this, Guro begins the concrete reflection upon her experiences, narrated from her first-person perspective.

### **Concrete reflection: Guro's first-person narrative**

One of the last things I promised the Kid before he was deported from Europe was that the two of us would meet somewhere in the world soon. But where? My own children would not let me go to his country, and my own country would not let the Kid stay here, so it needed to be some other place. A quick Google search led me to the eight member countries in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC): Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Afghanistan, Maldives, Bhutan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.

Of these, three countries stood out as the easiest to get a visa to, India being one of them. Did I have some contacts that could be helpful now?

My thoughts now led me to the international organization “Initiatives of Change” (IofC)<sup>6</sup>, with whom I had collaborated with in Norway a few years earlier. I had been awarded the Gandhi Scholarship in December 2008 from the Norwegian Church and Cultural Ministry for a project where I would try out my newly developed Dialogos approach (see Helskog, 2019) to the practice of philosophizing with students with diverse cultural and religious backgrounds (see Helskog, 2015). One of the teachers at the upper secondary school that I had contacted happened to be the leader of the Norwegian IofC team. In the spring of 2009, the international president of the organization, Kasturba and Mahatma Gandhi’s grandson, Rajmohan Gandhi, would visit Norway. Maybe I would like to join them in the programme arranged for Gandhi? Amongst others, Rajmohan Gandhi would visit NUPI (Norwegian Institute of Foreign Policy)<sup>7</sup>, as well as a mosque in Oslo. I was both surprised by the coincidence and delighted by the invitation. I had won the Gandhi Scholarship, and Gandhi’s grandson was coming to Norway!

Now I was reminded of all this, remembering that the main IofC centre was situated in India<sup>8</sup>. Maybe I could meet the Kid there? I continued my research, finding out that the IofC centre in Asia Plateau was in the small hill station village Panchgani, and that to get there, we both needed to fly to Pune, Maharashtra, and get a taxi to take us on the three-hour drive uphill. My next question was whether Pune had a university and if the university offered teacher education. Having received an internationalization grant<sup>9</sup> for females in academia from the University College<sup>10</sup> where I worked, I intended to combine my professional work with the personal promise I had given the Kid. The answer to both questions was yes: One of India’s and the world’s highest-ranked universities – Savitribai Phule Pune University (SPPU)<sup>11</sup> – was in Pune, and they offered teacher education under the leadership of Professor Sanjeev Sonawane. To my astonishment, I could read from their website that they had an ongoing project collaboration with Telemark University College, which my own university college had just merged with!

I contacted both the teacher education department at SPPU in Pune and Initiatives of Change at Asia Plateau in Panchgani, asking to visit them on certain dates in October 2017. Accidentally (or not?), Initiatives of Change would organise a conference for 100 school leaders from all over India during these dates. The conference was held within the programme “Education

Today, Society Tomorrow”<sup>12</sup>. Would I care to give a keynote speech on the practice of compassion and mindfulness in schools? Of course I would!

The Kid had been deported in March, and we met in India in October, seven months later. Meanwhile, I had established a support group. Two of the members worked on teaching the Kid English through a social media platform, while I tried to show him how he could use, for instance, YouTube for all kinds of educational, athletic, relaxational and meditative purposes.

Because the Kid had lost both his mother and father years before, and because his two sisters had been married off to older men, he had no family, so he spent days and nights on his own, including the Muslim Eid celebration. Knowing how important this day is for Muslims, and I the Kid shared pictures from our evening meal at a certain time that night in June 2017. One day,” I promised him, “we will celebrate Eid together”.

The internationalization grant I had been given was big enough for another journey, and I had long wanted to explore the philosophy for children (P4C) approach of Matthew Lipman and Ann Sharp in more depth. I thus decided to go to the source by signing up for the yearly summer seminar of the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) in New Jersey, organized by Lipman’s own institution, Montclair State University<sup>13</sup>. Arriving at the Mendham retreat in August, one of the first co-participants I talked to was, coincidentally a teacher from Mahindra United World College (UWC) outside of Pune, India!<sup>14</sup> By the time the week was over, we had made an agreement that I would take the Kid with me and visit him and his students at UWC during our stay in Maharashtra. So, we did and were met by two Norwegian students who showed us around. By the time we left, the idea to let the Kid study in India had emerged.

When coming to SPPU, meeting Dean Sanjeev Sonawane, I was bombarded with names of Norwegian colleagues that I had not yet met, but whom *he* had worked with for a decade already (see Duesund and Aasland, 2023). Moreover, several of the staff could tell that they had been to Norway too, visiting what is now campus Notodden at the University of South-Eastern Norway (USN)! Even though I thought I was well prepared, having had a meeting with the international office in Norway before leaving, I had obviously not really understood how I was about to enter a landscape of ongoing work. To the staff at SPPU I was just a new team member. To *me*, they were a mystery: What were the odds that of all the possible 1.4 billion people and of all the 1043 universities in India, not to mention the more than 1000 colleges in Pune itself, I had managed to bump into the

one institution and the handful of people that already collaborated with my Norwegian colleagues? I was mind-blown.

Arriving at the site of the *Education Today, Society Tomorrow* conference, a woman soon stood out. Having been a refugee as a child herself, the 80-year-old woman was moved by the Kids' story and shared hers with us. After the separation between India and Pakistan, after the death of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948, flows of refugees were travelling both ways: Muslims fled to Pakistan, and Hindus fled from the now Pakistani area into the remaining Indian area. Living on the streets and being a daughter in a family of nine siblings, the young Tanna was not given the opportunity to go to school. This experience was an important background for the founding of the organization, *Each One Teach One*<sup>15</sup>, not a bad headline for the online teaching practice with the Kid the previous six months either!

Another beautiful woman soon stood out – Dr. Usha Devi Reddy<sup>16</sup>. She was the CEO of the Meridian schools in Hyderabad<sup>17</sup>. We soon got into a talk that would develop into a long-standing friendship. In our first chat, she told me that the motto of the schools she was leading was “Connecting the mind and the heart”. Once again, I was astonished. I immediately showed Dr. Reddy the opening picture of the keynote presentation that I would hold the day after: a colourful drawing of a humanlike figure who plays strings between the mind and the heart!

As noted above, the Asia Plateau was situated in Panchgani. This tiny little village within huge India happened to be where Telemark University College had sent students for practice experience in early childhood education and school since the early 1990s. (Duesund and Aasland, 2023). However, I did not realize this coincidence – that the Indian Initiatives of Change headquarters was situated only a few hundred metres away from this school and the place the students used to live – before an actual school visit there with the rest of the USN team a few years later. Needless to say, driving past the Asia Plateau centre on our way to the hotel next door, I was once again taken aback.

Before leaving the conference in 2017, Dr. Reddy invited me and the Kid to visit her in her home in Hyderabad, and in June the year after, in 2018, we called her and asked if the invitation was still standing. If yes, we would like to accept the invitation. Her response was that “now is a good time”, and we flew from Pune to her town the day after. What I had not thought about when I chose the dates for the Kid and me to meet in India again was that these days were also the time of Eid. Knowing that the Kid was Muslim, Usha asked the Kid if he would like to join the Eid prayer. He

ironed his kurta, and off we went. As women and non-Muslims, we were invited to sit outside in the back, yet at a place where we were able to follow the ceremony.

One of the biggest tourist attractions in Hyderabad is the Falaknuma Palace. The Muslim *Nizam* had used the palace as a guest house for the royals visiting Hyderabad, the guests including King George V, Queen Mary, Edward VIII, and Tsar Nicholas II. The palace was now a museum and a luxury hotel, with a nice restaurant. It was the most perfect evening, with the Eid new moon and star constellation<sup>18</sup> shining brightly from a clear sky onto the three of us as we had an Eid meal together on the restaurant balcony. Coincidentally, it took exactly one year between when I promised the Kid that one day we would celebrate Eid together and when we did, in the most beautiful surroundings.

This was our second trip to India together. When coming to India for the first time, we arrived right before the Diwali festival, meaning that for some days, everything was closed. This gave us some days just to explore, and we came across the OSHO international community in Pune, ending up having a full day at what turned out to be a quite “westernised” ashram. During the day, we joined in dance meditation, dynamic meditation, and several other meditation classes, and even though we did not have a shared language yet, he understood enough to be able to answer my question of how he was doing. “I feel good, mamma”, he said, putting his right hand to his heart. Looking back at our day during our dinner at the ashram, we could not stop laughing. It was the first time I had seen him express joy and happiness.

When we planned our meeting in June the year after, I thus asked if he would like to stay an extra week at a yoga and meditation site while I left for a philosophical practice conference in Mexico. He would really like to, and I started exploring options. To make an already long story short, it all ended with the Kid living in a yoga institute in a remote place in India for one year, completing two of their yoga teacher training certifications (TTC), before starting his bachelor’s in a different area of studies in an Indian city. This time, the Kid would stay for another five years, just returning to his birth country for visa renewals.

Now, many years and nine journeys to India later, I am deeply involved in two projects on developing teacher education through internationalization between colleagues at Savitribai Phule Pune University and the University of South-Eastern Norway<sup>19</sup>, while the Kid is studying for a master’s degree at a university in Europe. Coincidentally, the Kid was the reason

why it all was set in motion. His story is worth a book in itself. For now, the story of how I got involved and became part of the international collaboration in the greater USN-SPPU project team suffices as a starting point for exploring these rather mysteriously connected experiences more thoroughly and in depth.

### **Critical reflection: What is at play in the narrative?**

When Guro shared her experiences with Christian and Michael, who became the co-authors of this essay, they were fascinated. Together, we started wondering and philosophizing about how these experiences could be interpreted. Was it the only legitimate interpretation to say that the respective events only happened by chance? Each one of us suggested and started exploring alternative scientific, philosophical, and theological perspectives that could illuminate these events. We took our point of departure in the hermeneutical question “What is at stake in the narrative?” which is central in the reflective practice research approach suggested by Lindseth (2020).

Obviously, what was at stake in this story was life itself – embodied in the life, the human growth and development of the Kid – and the pressing concern was: How could Guro help this Kid? At first, it seemed impossible. The decisions of the Norwegian state were non-negotiable. Then in the creative process of finding possibilities and openings, one good helper after another showed up, some providing ideas or guidance, others direct practical or economical support, while others again came in not primarily for the sake of the Kid but as a collaborative network of colleagues that would make it possible for her to continue to support the Kid while conducting international research and development work together with them. Hence, the private voluntary efforts to help the Kid to an education and a good future cannot be separated from internationalization efforts and collaboration with people and institutions, privately and professionally. Each incident or experience was contextualized in time and space, developing from a complex, non-explicated series of previous events and incidents, leading to complex networks of consequences and new actions.

The inner drive to help the Kid opened spaces of professional opportunities, one incident leading to the next, creating what in retrospect can be interpreted as patterns of connected and meaningful incidents, as Richard Tarnas describes in his foreword to the anthology *The Playful Universe: Synchronicity and the Nature of Consciousness*:

“Most of us in the course of life have observed coincidences in which two or more independent events, having no apparent causal connection, nevertheless seem to form a meaningful pattern. On occasion, this patterning can strike one as so extraordinary that it is difficult to believe the coincidence has been produced by chance alone. The events give the distinct impression of having been precisely arranged, invisibly orchestrated.” (Tarnas, 2024: iii)

Even though there are not really any definite beginnings and endings in the flow of life, and with the risk of becoming too simplistic, we have extracted seven patterns of coincidences:

**Pattern 1:** Receiving the Gandhi Scholarship 2008 – encounter with initiatives of Change and Rajmohan Gandhi 2009 – the stay and presentation at Asia Plateau in Panchgani 2017.

**Pattern 2:** The promise to help the Kid with education in the spring of 2017 – teaching through Facebook Messenger – Encounter with the founder of the organization, *Each One Teach One*.

**Pattern 3:** Researching traditions and ways of philosophizing – encounter with the Mahindra United World College teacher at the Mendham retreat – school visit to Mahindra United World College – idea to let the Kid study in India.

**Pattern 4:** Work in teacher education at the University of South-Eastern Norway – looking for a teacher education institution in India – encounter with the Savitribai Phule Pune University team, who had been collaborating with Guro’s new colleagues for several years.

**Pattern 5:** Sending YouTube meditation videos through Messenger to help the Kid relax and find some peace from fear – spending a day at Osho Ashram in Pune – one year of lodging and yoga teacher training at a yoga institute in India for the Kid.

**Pattern 6:** The Kid celebrating Eid 2017 alone in a park, and I promised that one day we would celebrate Eid together – the invitation to visit Usha Devi Reddy in Hyderabad – the celebration of Eid 2018 together at the castle restaurant under the Eid moon and star constellation.

**Pattern 7:** Applying for project grants for developing teacher education – receiving, respectively, the JOIN and TeachIN grants, making extensive collaboration on internationalization of teacher education possible – publication of this essay and anthology on international collaboration.

These patterns are, of course, our *interpretations* of how these incidents are meaningfully connected. However, when the incidents happened and when the different actions were taken to help the Kid, it seemed to Guro that everything fell into place in almost “mysterious” ways. Obviously, a lot of efforts were made and work put in, not the least by the Kid, but it was as though a path opened both to the Kid and Guro as they took action. Michael and Christian were equally astonished when listening to Guro’s experiences of the interconnectedness between the incidents. Together, they created these conceptualizations.

In the efforts to help the Kid, it was not possible for Guro to plan beforehand. Every step on the way was taken in darkness, so to speak. They implied looking for opportunities and taking action without knowing what the next step would be. Only in retrospect is it possible to see that the steps had been good and that they led to the meeting with people, to opportunities and to insights that could not possibly be anticipated. The actions taken were not driven mainly by rational decision-making but rather embodied responses made possible through what can be labelled *synchronicities*, defined by Carl G. Jung (1973) as meaningful coincidences without any known causal relationship. Each action was taken due to a “hunch”, based on what is popularly called a “gut feeling”, or more academically called *intuition*, as a response to what each situation opened up for. Looking back, it even seems that there was an undercurrent or of embracing *divine guidance* supporting Guro’s efforts. In the following, we will explore these three phenomena as embedded in three different epistemologies.

## Synchronicity, intuition, and divine guidance

In the following three parts of the essay, the questions above will be reflected upon through different perspectives. The first perspective is what Christian Stokke calls a postmaterialist empirical approach, where the coincidences are understood in terms of the concept of synchronicity. In the second perspective, Michael Noah Weiss employs a humanistic approach of existential *meaning-making*, where the events are interpreted as intuitions. In the third perspective, Guro Hansen Helskog contemplates the patterns of events in terms of divine guidance, which cannot be fully understood but leaves us standing in the open.



### *Understanding the patterns as synchronicities*

Within a postmaterialist paradigm that unites science and spirituality, the revelations Guro experienced can be understood as *synchronicities* (Wool-lacott, Lorimer & Schwartz, 2024). Carl Jung first defined synchronicity as “the simultaneous occurrence of two meaningfully but not causally connected events” (1973: 25). These coincidences may be between a subjective mental event and an objective or observable event, but in stronger cases, two or more observable events coincide.

Even though inner turmoil and hard work were involved, Guro many times felt an almost magical interconnectedness between events, where everything fell effortlessly into place. In positive psychology, this is what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) calls a “state of flow”. According to him, it is common among people with a spiritual worldview to experience that when they take one step in alignment with their soul’s purpose, the universe responds with ten steps, and this opens to an experience of reality as a magical place where intentions manifest into physical reality. As Joseph Campbell (1968) says in “A Hero with a Thousand Faces”, when we “follow our bliss”, magic happens.

Philosopher of religion David Ray Griffin (2001) describes this post-materialist paradigm as “re-enchantment without supernaturalism”, where both science and religion give up their respective dogmas of materialism and supernaturalism. This is a scientific paradigm that re-enchants the world, taking spiritual experiences seriously as empirical data. Whereas a humanistic worldview assumes that ultimate meaning cannot be known, the scientific paradigm assumes that it *can* be known through empirical observations and descriptions. Spirituality is not just about people’s perceptions of the world but also about observable empirical realities. Already in 1981, Sheldrake (1981) noted this paradigm shift and described a change in how we perceive the world, towards a merging of science and spirituality, rationality and intuition. This is a postmaterialist worldview, which includes an energetic understanding of the universe.

Quantum physicist David Bohm (1996) suggests that consciousness may be the basic building block of the universe, which creates energy and the material world. He theorizes that matter emerges from a unified field of conscious energy that is the source of all Being. In the worldview of Newton and Descartes, only surface reality is visible, where humans and material objects appear to be separate, and events are random. However, there is a deeper level of reality beyond the physical, and it is not possible to under-

stand subatomic systems without taking this level into account. Quantum physicist Nassim Hameiri (2015) shows how everything in the universe is connected through protons, and each particle of the universe carries the information of the whole. William Tiller (1997) suggests that energy is the link between the inner world of consciousness and the outer material reality. He explains that intentions and expectations affect physical reality because physical reality is a materialized reflection of consciousness, which means that we co-create the world. Several experimental studies at the HeartMath Institute show how we affect the physical when we align thoughts and emotions, mind and heart. Leading-edge natural science thus supports a post-materialist paradigm where consciousness is prior to matter and provides scientific evidence for the spiritual phenomenon of manifesting intentions into reality.

From this perspective, the patterns of events experienced by Guro are subjectively perceived as “meaningful coincidences” or *synchronicities* – a commonly reported mystical phenomenon first defined by Carl Jung (1973) as an acausal coincidence between inner and outer events. Synchronicities that include a subjective inner event have been difficult to verify, but many synchronicities occur where two or more events that are observable by outsiders occur together, and this is also the case with the events experienced by Guro.

In transpersonal psychology, Bethany Butzer (2021) investigates whether coincidences are merely random or if there is something to the Jungian concept. She suggests that synchronicities say something about the fundamental nature of consciousness and that the most plausible explanation is that consciousness is prior to matter, as suggested by Bohm (1996) and Tiller (1997).

The post-materialist paradigm implies a naturalistic worldview where perceived magic is explained through natural science. This paradigm does not require any supernatural or religious explanations, but it does not rule out a metaphorical understanding of a divine or religious realm. What is called ‘consciousness’ and ‘energy’ in the post-materialist worldview may well correspond to what religious people would call ‘God’.

While the postmaterialist research orientation seeks to understand synchronicity as empirical phenomenon that can be systematically observed and described, humanistic approaches seek to understand the *meaning* of phenomena. With his famous and extensive approach to humans’ search for meaning, Viktor Frankl (2000) was one of the first who put forth an

understanding of spirituality that was not intrinsically interrelated with religion.

### *Understanding the patterns as intuitions*

In his book *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning* (2000), Frankl asserts that

“‘Spiritual’ is used here without any religious connotation, of course, but rather just to indicate that we are dealing with a specifically human phenomenon in contrast to the phenomena that we share with other animals. In other words, the ‘spiritual’ is what is human in man.” (Frankl, 2000: 28)

If one wants to understand Guro's narrative in a meaningful way (and this is what Frankl is after with his approach) and not discount it as a series of accidental incidents, one might come around to taking a more spiritual perspective into account, where intuitive insights and phenomena of synchronicity are rather interpreted as “signs on the way” than mere random events.

When speaking of “signs on the way”, the Socratic daimonion can be mentioned (see e.g. Plato, 1997: Crito, 44a; Apology, 31c-d, 33c, 40a; Phaedo, 60e). Literally speaking, *daimonion* means *divine sign*, and Socrates understood it as a spiritual resource “which he valued even higher than his faculty of reason” (Weiss, 2021: 3). Talking to him in critical situations in terms of an inner voice, the daimonion “was some sort of an impersonal, spiritual faculty or agent that offered him intuitively perceived signs, which gave him orientation on his life path.” (ibid.) Frankl introduced a conception of conscience quite similar to Socrates' daimonion when it comes to its spiritual, transcendent nature. He argues that all freedom has a “from what” and a “to what”. The “from what” of man's freedom is what Frankl calls “his being driven”, and the “to what” is what he calls “his being responsible” and “his having conscience”. He further argues that these two facets of the human condition can be expressed by an admonition from Maria von Eschenbach:

“Be the master of your will and the servant of your conscience!” [...] But if I am also to be “the servant of my conscience,” then I may ask whether this conscience has not to be something higher than he who merely perceives its “voice?” (cited from Frankl, 2000:59)

In other words, Frankl argues, a human being cannot be the servant of his/her conscience unless s/he understands conscience as a phenomenon

transcendent of man. Conscience cannot be considered simply in terms of its psychological facticity but must also be grasped in its transcendent essence:

“I can be the servant of my conscience only when the dialogue with my conscience is a genuine *dia-logos* rather than a *mono-logos*. This, however, can only be so when my conscience transcends myself, when it is the mediator of something other than myself. [...]” (Frankl, 2000: 59)

Frankl further argues that only the transcendent quality of conscience makes it possible to understand man in depth – to understand his “being a person”. Seen in this light, the term “person” takes on a new meaning: Through the conscience of the human person, a transhuman agent *personat* – “is sounding through”. Hence, Frankl argues: “Only with reference to transcendence, only as some sort of transcendent phenomenon, can conscience really be understood.” (Frankl, 2000: 59). In this respect is Hannah Arendt’s description of the Socratic dialogue as midwifery, where she also talks about the inner dialogue with conscience in her work *The Life of the Mind* (1978).

By means of this description of conscience, one could interpret the previously presented narration in a way that Guro perceived her daimonion, that is, perceived *divine signs* in terms of the opportunities that opened in the form of the patterns of incidents. These patterns of incidents understood as *signs* are not something objective in nature, but rather they are personal in the actual sense of the word: *as signs* – to use Frankl’s words – they were “sounding through” (*per-sonat*) and responded to by that person (the narrator), which made this a true *dia-logos*<sup>20</sup>. That is, a *dialogue with conscience*, through which meaning (*logos*) could shine through (*dia*). At this point, one might object that this interpretation and understanding of Guro’s experiences seem quite irrational. And in fact, Frankl would agree because,

“Conscience is irrational; it is allogical or, better put, prelogical. [...] What is disclosed to conscience is something that *is*; however, what is revealed to conscience is not anything that *is* but, rather, something that *ought to be*. What merely ought to be is not real but is something to make real; it is no actuality but mere possibility (although in a higher, ethical sense, such a possibility again represents a necessity). (Frankl, 2000: 40)

He further reflects that insofar as that which has been disclosed to conscience is still to be actualized, the question emerges of how it could be

realized unless it were somehow anticipated in the first place. Such anticipation, however, can only be enacted through *intuition*.

With that, we arrive at the very nature of conscience, which “is essentially intuitive” (Frankl, 2000: 40). In Guro’s experiences with the Kid, she anticipated Daimonic signs intuitively, *Dia-logos* – as one could put it. Yet, when Frankl states that what is disclosed to conscience is something that “*ought to be*”, he not only points out the intuitive nature of conscience. Rather, he gives an account of what *responsibility* means in light of this conception of conscience, namely, to respond to the signs of one’s daimonion in terms of doing what *ought to be* done. And this is what Guro did with regard to the Kid, that is, to turn the possibilities that the concrete situations revealed into actualities to meet her promise towards the Kid. It was in this interplay, this dialogue between the concrete possibilities and Guro’s actions in response (*responsibility*), that she could see through (*dia*) to the meaning (*logos*) of this situation. As Frankl (2000: 29) so beautifully expresses it:

Man is not he who poses the question *What is the meaning of life?* but he who is asked this question, for it is life itself that poses it to him. And man has to answer to life by answering for life; he has to respond by being responsible; in other words, the response is necessarily a response-in-action.

He further states that while we respond to life “in action”, we are responding in the “here and now” – in the concreteness of a person and the concreteness of the situation in which he is involved. Thus, he argues, our responsibility is always responsibility *ad personam* and *ad situationem*.

The question – *What does life expect from us?* – in the concrete situations in which we are constantly immersed, fundamentally shifts the focus on our existence. In a certain way, it was also the question that Guro asked herself, and by asking it, she became aware of the opportunities that she had as a person (*ad personam*) in the given situations (*ad situationem*). Interestingly, only by following the meanings that revealed themselves in the given situations could the previously described patterns of incidents unfold. In other words, the opportunities that showed up in each of these situations did not only make sense to Guro. Rather, they appeared to be meaningful, and the “meaningfulness” made her choose them, so to speak. They spoke to her, so to speak. With Guro’s experience as an example, the question “What does life expect from us?” essentially asks us whether there is meaning in our existence or not. How can we know that – and can we ever know that at all? With regards to the history of the philosophy of science,

with all its concepts, theories, and dilemmas, the answer to that question tends towards a “no”, that is, we cannot *know* whether life has meaning or not. In this regard, however, Frankl points out an important difference between knowledge and faith that appears to have a profound impact on human existence. What is “unknowable”, he argues (2000: 146), need not be unbelievable. In fact, where knowledge gives up, the torch is passed on to faith. It is true that it is not possible to find out intellectually whether there is an ultimate meaning behind everything. But if we cannot answer the question intellectually, we may well do so existentially. Where an intellectual cognition fails, an existential decision is due:

Vis-à-vis the fact that it is equally conceivable that everything is absolutely meaningful and that the scales are equally high, we must throw the weight of our own being into one of the scales. And precisely therein, I see the function to carry out my belief. In contrast to what people are prone to assume, namely, believing is not at all some sort of thinking minus the reality of that which is thought, believing is rather some sort of thinking plus something, namely, the existentiality of him or her who does the thinking. (Frankl, 2000: 146)

The existentiality that Frankl addresses here appears to be a turning point to argue for a spiritual understanding of Guro’s narrative that is not reliant upon empirical data and analysis. For it was how the narrator *experienced* this situation – her experienced existence – that suggested a different view than a scientific-rationalistic one – a different understanding to *sense* the *meaning of the experiences*. However, when ‘going down this rabbit hole’ that opens up when taking on such a spiritual perspective, it is not only intuition that comes into the spotlight. Also, questions about the spiritual dimension as such become pressing.

While we have now contemplated the meaning of the incidents from the perspective of the intuitive, conscience-driven, and responsible action of Guro, we will now expand the perspective to also reflect upon Guro’s experiences from a religious perspective. With the help of Marcus J. Borg, amongst others, we will reflect upon the question of whether there was some sort of *divine guidance* involved in the patterns of interlinked experiences of Guro.

### ***Understanding the patterns as divine guidance***

All religions in the world that have endured the test of time unambiguously affirm that there is a “stupendous, magnificent, wondrous ‘More’ in the world”, Marcus J. Borg (1989: 37) argues, borrowing the notion

“More” from William James’s book “The Varieties of Religious Experience” (1902). He describes this “More” as a “nonmaterial layer or level” and “extra dimension” of reality. The “More” has been named in various ways, as the Dao, Allah, Brahman, Atman, God, Spirit, the Sacred or Yahweh. He further argues that data of religious experience is highly suggestive of the reality of this “More”, especially in its dramatic forms of visionary and mystical experiences. People across cultures, traditions and continents throughout history have had experiences that to them are overwhelming signs of this sacred “More”. Hence, the experiential base of religion is very strong, Borg argues. He suggests that God “speaks” to us

sometimes dramatically in visions, less dramatically in some of our dreams, in internal “proddings” or “leadings”, through people. ( . . . ) We sometimes have a sense – I sometimes have a sense – of being *addressed*. (Borg, 1989: 63–64)

Especially the “internal prodding” and “leadings through people” were part of Guro’s experiences. The term “prodded” is not directly found in the Bible; however, the concept of being urged, encouraged, or stirred into action is prevalent throughout the Scriptures. The idea of prodding can be understood as a form of divine or human encouragement to fulfil God’s will or to act in accordance with His commandments<sup>21</sup>. Borg refers to contemporary author Frederick Buechner: “Listen to what happens to you because it is through what happens to you that God speaks” (p. 73). If we accept this as a possibility, the many coincidences involved in Guro’s effort to help the Kid can be seen as a continuously ongoing conversation with and guidance by “the More”.

In his book *Openness Mind, Open Heart*, Thomas Keating (2006) asserts that in the contemplative life, one lives in a world in which God can do everything. To move into that realm is the greatest adventure, he argues. It is to be open to the Infinite and hence to infinite possibilities:

Our private, self-made world comes to an end, a new world appears within and around us, and the impossible becomes an everyday experience in which one lives in an abiding state of union with God. (Keating, 2006: 11–12)

In such openness, which is like an ongoing prayer in which one constantly lives in and with the mystery, the inspiration of the Spirit is given directly to our spirit without the intermediary of our own reflections or acts of will, Keating (2006: 17) further argues. In such a state, one lives with presence and attentiveness rather than understanding. The Spirit speaks to our conscience through scriptures and events in daily life, making daily life a con-

stant revelation of God. Indeed, presence and attentiveness were pivotal in Guro's experiences in the sense that she otherwise might not have sensed that the opportunities that showed up were the right causes of action. If she had acted purely from a rational and pragmatic mindset, she might have made choices that would have led to very different outcomes. Yet this is something that is more easily seen when the story can be told in retrospect.

Another metaphor that is relevant in order to understand the coincidences Guro experienced from a religious perspective is the metaphor of the "heart". The word "heart" appears well over a thousand times in the Bible, most often as a comprehensive metaphor for the inner self as a whole. The metaphor refers to a level of the self that is deeper than the intellect and the world of ideas – a level below our thinking, feeling, and willing, Borg argues (2003: 26). As a spiritual conception of the total self, our "heart" affects our sight, our thoughts, our feelings, and our will. However, our hearts can be open, soft and "meat-like", or closed, shut, hard and "stone-like". When our hearts are closed and stonelike, we live within a shell. Blindness and limited vision, lack of understanding, bondage, ungratefulness, insensitivity to wonder and awe, self-preoccupation, lack of compassion, and blindness to injustice are among the characteristics of a "closed heart". In severe form, hard hearts are associated with violence, brutality, arrogance, and greed (Borg, 1989, pp. 149–154). However, Borg suggests that the closed heart is the natural result of the process of growing up, creating the need for a process of inner transformation, which is the essence and at the heart (sic!) of all world religions. This inner transformation implies opening the heart. When our hearts are closed, we do not see. The world looks ordinary, isolated as we are in our own worlds. In the Christian understanding, our hearts are understood as being opened through the transformative process of "being born again". A similar process of heart-opening is described by respondents in research on spiritual awakenings outside of religious contexts (Stokke and Rodriguez, 2021, 2023). When our heart is open, we live a life centred in God (or Allah, Jahve, Dao, or Atman) and see and hear more clearly. We come alive to wonder, experiencing the world as extraordinary. The seven patterns of coincidences interpreted from the narrated story of Guro were indeed experienced as extraordinary. They would probably not have been experienced as such if Guro were "stone-hearted" and closed in her own world. Then she might not have bothered to try to help the Kid either.

The primary quality of a life centred in God is, according to Borg (1989:



associated with being “womblike”, life-giving, nourishing, and embracing. When Guro acted upon her instant care for the terrified parentless Kid before he was deported from Norway, she obviously acted out of compassion, and it might metaphorically and from the perspective of Borg be argued that she acted from an open, meat-like heart. However, when she continued to support him with the help of others, other qualities also came into play. Consistent hard work was one of them. Moreover, the equivalent of compassion in personal life is work for justice in political life. Obviously, a driving force in Guro’s efforts to help the Kid was the pain of seeing him being subjected to unjust global policies. As Borg (1989: 162) puts it: An open heart, compassion, ethical impulse, and justice go together: ‘An open heart feels the suffering and pain of the world and responds to it’.

Taylor (2007) speaks about the “closed heart” in a slightly different way, namely as the “buffered self”. While the dominant understanding in ancient and medieval times was that the human being is fundamentally *porous* and *relational*, modernity created splits and separations between the inner and the outer, between humans and nature, between humans and the cosmic order, and between humans and God. It implied a shift towards the idea that religion should be understood through reason alone, Taylor (2007) argues. The consequence is what he calls a move from, respectively, “enchantment” towards “disenchantment”, and from a “porous” towards a “buffered” self. The disenchantment and buffering implied the development of the closed mindset of an inner self that is separate and distanced from others and from the world, i.e., who lives with a closed heart, to use the expression of Borg (1989). From this perspective, it seems that Guro acted from an open heart and with a porous self, perceiving an enchanted world.

Here, it is also relevant to draw Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (2004) into the picture. He (2004) speaks about three spheres of dialogical “I-Thou” relations, corresponding to three types of otherness: dialogue with man, dialogue with nature, and dialogue with spirit. Dialogue with man is, according to him, characterized by *exchange in language*, broadly speaking. Dialogue with nature is characterized by *transmitting below language*, while dialogue with spirit is characterized as *receiving above language*. If we truly enter into a dialogical relationship with another human being, a landscape, a flower, or a horse, or with God, Atman, or Allah, we apprehend it not as a *thing* with certain attributes to be separated, analysed, and conceptualized under universal principles, but as a whole, singular being that is *related* to the I, Buber (2004) argues. Understood in the perspective of Buber, the coincidences Guro experienced might also be seen as a dia-

logue with other humans and spirits involving both exchange in language and receiving above language.

## Final comments

This essay started with Guro's concrete narration and reflection upon how she has tried to help a minor refugee whom she met in 2016 to get an education and a decent life. Her experiences involved a series of coincidental experiences that, in the critical reflection section, were interpreted as seven patterns of interlinked incidents and events, some of them happening many years apart. Then followed a theoretical reflection section where we tried to understand the patterns of coincidences from three different epistemological perspectives.

In the essay "Reflective practice research and kaleidoscopic epistemology", two of us authors, Guro and Michael (2023), reflect upon how the reflective practitioner-researcher takes his or her point of departure in singular-particular, concrete, and unique experiences that are, as we have seen exemplified in this essay, contextualized and related to other human beings and incidents. An experience can always be studied from numerous perspectives. It also contains numerous aspects and relationships that can be studied separately and together. This was the background for our choice of the metaphor "kaleidoscopic". Human experience is not static. It is dynamic, and our understanding of things can change if we take a new perspective, select a different dimension of the experience as a focus point, or understand the experience on the basis of different epistemologies. In this essay, we have experimented with three different ways of interpreting and understanding the experiences. The post-materialist approach invited us to study the narrations as "data" and "facts", indicating that Guro's experiences of coincidences were incidents of *synchronicities*. The humanistic approach invited us to go deeper into the experiences, interpreting the possible existential meaning of them as driven by Guro's *intuition*, by drawing spiritual but not religious worldviews into the picture. Finally, the third theological approach included perspectives from religious traditions, understanding the coincidences as *divine guidance*. However, regardless of approach, all we can say is that the coincidences happened, that we can apply different perspectives and ways of understanding them, but that it is impossible to conclude in an absolute way how the coincidences came about and how they are related to each other. As such, we went all the way to the

limit of language – the place where the mysterious depth of the experiences has opened up to us, leaving us in awe and wonder.

The boundary between what can be named in words and what cannot is the place where the relationship between cataphatic *knowing* (from the Gr. *Katafemi*, meaning ‘to be able to express, confirm’) and apophatic *not-knowing* (from the Gr. *apofemi*, meaning ‘to not be able to say, to negate’) comes to the fore (see Innerdal and Rise, 2016). Is it possible to research that which is unknowable, that which is beyond what can be expressed in language? That is a question Finn Thorbjørn Hansen has reflected upon in recent publications (2022, 2023; Thorsted and Hansen, 2022), including in his contribution to the present anthology. The two concepts, the cataphatic and the apophatic, relate to phenomena that cannot be grasped via cognitive, rational, methodical, and scientific approaches and language. If we are to reach these depths of existence, we need to go via poetry, art, and deep philosophical wonder, Hansen (2025) argues. However, to write about such experiences always falls short, simply because language does not suffice.

We leave it to the reader to decide whether the coincidences reflected upon in this essay either imply synchronicities, intuitions, or divine guidance, or none or all of them. We have reached the limits of language and human understanding itself and are left *standing in the open* (Hansen, 2010). The chains of incidents remain a mystery, and we can only wonder, also, about what will happen next in the story of the life of the Kid.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Guro Hansen Helskog holds a position as professor of pedagogy at the University of South-Eastern Norway. She developed the Dialogos approach to philosophical practice from 2004 on and has published several books and research articles both in Norwegian and English, amongst them *Philosophising the Dialogos Way towards Wisdom in Education. Between Critical Thinking and Spiritual Contemplation* (Routledge 2019). Together with Michael Noah Wise, she is co-hosting the *ResponsAbility Podcast*.

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<sup>3</sup> Christian Stokke is an associate professor at the Department of Culture, Religion and Social Studies at the University of Southeastern Norway. He holds a PhD in Social Anthropology, and his research interests include multiculturalism, intercultural understanding, religion, and spirituality. He has published several articles on contemporary spirituality and its relationship to science, religion, and philosophy. Christian also teaches in the Norwegian teacher education programmes and supervises master's and PhD students in the areas of human rights, multiculturalism, cultural studies, spirituality, and education.

- <sup>4</sup> “The Kid”, who is now an adult, has read and approved the essay and also our calling him “the Kid”.
- <sup>5</sup> We have chosen not to name the country or city in order to protect “the Kid”.
- <sup>6</sup> See Home |IofC International
- <sup>7</sup> See Afghanistan, India and Pakistan: Can suspicious neighbours move towards cooperation? |NUPI
- <sup>8</sup> See IofC Global Centres |IofC International
- <sup>9</sup> Norges Forskningsråds programme BALANSE-Kjønnsbalanse i toppstillinger og forskningsledelse; prosjekt 245261 Women in Research; Individual and Organizational Learning for improved Gender Balance (KLOK): 2015–2017.
- <sup>10</sup> After the merger, the name of the institution first changed to University College of South-Eastern Norway, before getting a university status and changing name again: University of South-Eastern Norway (usn.no)
- <sup>11</sup> See Savitribai Phule Pune University, One of the Premier Universities in India – Official Website. (unipune.ac.in)
- <sup>12</sup> edNet Forum: Education Today, Society Tomorrow (ETST): Charter for Compassion
- <sup>13</sup> See IAPC Summer Seminar – Institute for The Advancement of Philosophy for Children – Montclair State University
- <sup>14</sup> See UWC India – UWC Mahindra College
- <sup>15</sup> Home Page – Each One Teach One Foundation (eotoindia.org)
- <sup>16</sup> Dr. Usha Devi Reddy has read the essay and approved that we acknowledge her by using her full name.
- <sup>17</sup> See <http://meridianschool.in>
- <sup>18</sup> A Scientific Overview of Eid Moon Sightings – Dr Phil Sutton (wordpress.com)
- <sup>19</sup> The two projects were respectively NOTED 2017 – four year/10039 Quality in teacher education – joining forces through internationalization (JOIN) and UTFORSK 2020. UTF-2020/10045 – Teacher Education for Sustainable Futures in India and Norway (TeachIN), both led by Associate Professor Åsmund Aamaas.
- <sup>20</sup> In Helskog (2021), Guro reflects upon how coincidence and synchronicity were involved in how she in 2004 chose Dialogos as the name of her approach to philosophical practice.
- <sup>21</sup> See ... Topical Bible: Prodded

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## CHAPTER 9: EXPLORING OUR CULTURAL-HISTORICAL

Guro Hansen Helskog<sup>1</sup> and Vaibhav Jadhav<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

*Using a reflective practice research approach, this essay takes its departure in four small episodes where the European one of the authors experienced that she did not fully understand what happened to her. The experiences included two inaugural ceremonies, a comment from a participant at a Dialogos workshop, and the experience of someone bending down to touch her feet. The episodes made her wonder, and in her efforts to better understand, she invited her Indian colleague to reflect upon the episodes together with her. Through the collaborative cultural-historical reflections that followed, what can be understood as glimpses into leftover aspects of the ancient Indian Gurukul tradition opened up not only for her but also for him. This again is used as an opportunity to reflect upon attitudes needed for the reciprocal widening of one's horizons of understanding in international collaboration.*

### Key words

Cultural-historical situatedness – the Gurukul tradition – Dialogos – Philosophical practice – Intercultural Dialogue – Reflective Practice Research

### Introduction

“Because the United States is so powerful, you can walk all over the world and not learn anything. You know, you can just speak English all the time and think, “Oh well, I can always find a McDonald’s”, and you don’t have to learn anything about the traditions of the country that you’re going to. But that’s terrible. It is the recipe for a too-scornful policy. So, what you need is a history of the world – global history”.



These are the words of world-renowned philosopher Martha Nussbaum in our ResponsAbility podcast episode (Weiss and Helskog, 2025) about, amongst other things, her book “Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities” (2010/2024). The problem she poses, that people can travel the world without learning anything about the culture and traditions of the country they are in, is not only a problem for laypeople. It is a problem worth considering also in international collaboration and internationalization efforts as such. The purposes of Norway’s internationalization efforts are, amongst others, to increase people’s ability to meet the challenges and opportunities that arise from globalization and international interaction in working life and in society, to improve language skills and understanding of and insight into other cultures, and to also broaden the geographical perspective, “for example in the direction of new economies”, as stated by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research (2008–2009: 4). However, even with such purposes, taking part in internationalization projects does not guarantee deep learning about the culture one is in. It all depends on the degree to which one reflects upon all the different experiences of discrepancies that most likely will appear in longitudinal collaboration.

Therefore, I, Guro Hansen Helskog, who am the European one of us, narrate four small episodes where I experienced that I did not fully understand what I was experiencing. Two of the episodes left me in some kind of awkward surprise and light embarrassment, then in wonder. I understood that the feelings and the practices that caused them probably had cultural roots. As such, the episodes were examples of small intercultural and maybe even interreligious experiences that most likely are common in international collaboration between people from different cultural contexts. Because such experiences are common, they are not necessarily reflected upon more deeply. Therefore, in order to shed light on them, and in order to understand, I asked my colleague Vaibhav Jadhav from Savitribai Phule Pune University to reflect together with me on the episodes, trying to understand them from an Indian perspective. In addition to being embedded in Indian cultural and academic life, Vaibhav is considered an expert in Indian philosophy of education in general and in the Indian Gurukul tradition in particular. Moreover, since 2018, the two of us have collaborated extensively in two internationalization projects between Savitribai Phule Pune University and the University of South-Eastern Norway<sup>3</sup>. The friendship between us has made it easy for me to talk about my embarrassment, surprise, and wonder, show my vulnerability and not-knowingness, and ask those challenging questions you might not ask a complete stranger in their

The research approach used is inspired by the broad field of reflective practice (see, i.e. Bradbury, et al., 2009) as well as action research (see, i.e. Reason and Bradbury, 2008). It might also be seen as a culturally-historical oriented variant of reflective practice research as conceptualized by Anders Lindseth (2015). He is grounding the approach in phenomenology (see e.g. Husserl, 1950; Heidegger, 1975; Ricoeur, 1984) and hermeneutics (see i.e. Gadamer, 1993). The reflective research- and essay structure suggested by Lindseth (2015) is to begin with first-person narration in the form of concrete reflection, followed by critical reflection drawing out one or a few themes that are then finally reflected theoretically. In this concrete essay, however, we have chosen to let the narrated stories of Guro's experiences be followed by what we have chosen to call *cultural-historical reflection*. Then follow some more general theoretical and philosophical reflections, drawing on perspectives from Gadamer's (1960) hermeneutics.

The first little episode happened at the opening of a conference during my (Guro's) first visit to India in 2017, while the second, third and fourth episodes happened at the beginning of, during, and at the end of two Dialogos workshops which I conducted with teacher educators working at 12 colleges affiliated with Savitribai Phule Pune University (SPPU) in 2022. The incidents passed in a matter of seconds, and they might as well have been left unnoticed, as they, on the surface, may seem unimportant and without any significance. Yet digging into them, deep cultural-historical roots were conveyed, shedding light also on my own Norwegian culture of origin.

I had been invited to be the keynote speaker of the conference “Education today – Society tomorrow” hosted by the organization Initiatives of Change.

in Panchgani. When arriving, I was asked if I would care to “light the lamp” at the opening ceremony. Without really understanding what I was asked, I (of course) accepted the invitation, finding my place at the first row together with the organizer – the auditorium now filling up with more than 100 educational leaders from all over India. “When given the sign, you just go up there, putting light to the lamp at the stage”, the person next to me answered when I asked what I was supposed to do. After a speech in Hindi, the sign was given, and I lit the lamp, yet I felt awkward: Did I do it the way they expected me to do it? Was I supposed to stand up there longer than I did? And not the least: What was really the purpose of putting light to a lamp that would make no difference to the lighting of the big auditorium?

At the time, so much else called for my attention (see Helskog, Weiss, and Stokke, 2025, in this anthology) that I did not ask any further. Yet a similar feeling of awkwardness a few years later reminded me of the situation. Now, 17 teacher educators were sitting around the big U-table in the School of Education (SoE) conference room at Savitribai Phule Pune University. Up front, four chairs were lined up. We were waiting for the formal inauguration ceremony to begin. The ceremony would mark the start of the first of two three-day Dialogos workshops.

Coming from an informal Norwegian culture where academic ceremonies were rare, the PhD defence ritual being one of the few that I have ever attended, I found it rather difficult to sit alone up front with everybody’s eyes on me. My background as the daughter of a farmer and a housewife and having grown up as a shy child and teenager, did not help. So, I found a plastic chair and sat down in a corner beneath the lectern. “Professor, you should sit there!” one of the participants exclaimed, pointing to the row of chairs. The others nodded. “Yes, Ma’am, you should sit up front!” Smiling, hopefully signalling that I appreciated their care, I answered that “I prefer to sit here for now”, adding that “you know, as the facilitator of this workshop, I am the lowest in this room”. The second, after having said this, I regretted my attempt to play around with roles. Hierarchies are strong in India, and I was a guest. The teacher educators were caringly guiding me into a part of their academic culture, and I answered with something like a joke. Maybe I should have just accepted the invitation to sit up front while waiting? This feeling of indecisiveness and ambiguity ran through me. If I had known I would just sit there for a few minutes, it would have been easier. But after several visits to India, I knew that things hardly ever started on time in India. For all I knew, I would be sitting there for the next couple of hours, with the kind and curious eyes of the arriving participants on me.

About an hour after the scheduled time, all who were supposed to be part of the inauguration ceremony had arrived, and the ceremony could start, with short, formal speeches from the leaders of the School of Education. My feelings of slight embarrassment now changed to an awkwardness of being at the centre of the formalities, sitting up front with the others, again not really understanding what was going on.

Reflecting critically upon this episode, the theme of *cultural-historical embeddedness and meaning* emerges. For me, being at the centre of the ritual of the inauguration ceremony was an experience that, in some respects, collided with my own personal and cultural habituation. I did not know how to behave and could thus not really relax in the situation. For the Indian teacher educators, the ceremony was something normal and familiar, a part of academic life that they took for granted, and thus never questioned. Thus, when I asked Vaibhav Jadhav, from now on Vaibhav, about my experiences, he was forced to reflect too. Answers to my questions did not come easily for Vaibhav either, maybe because he was embedded in the tradition himself and thus blind to it. It was just something he, like the teacher educators, had taken for granted and thus never thought about. let alone reflected critically upon. Concerning Episodes 1 and 2, it is therefore relevant to ask the question *What is the cultural meaning of the Indian inauguration ceremonies?* We have reflected together upon this, yet Vaibhav is the one bringing in the knowledge.

### *The cultural-historical meaning of the Indian inaugural ceremonies*

When visiting higher education institutions in India, coming as university staff from Europe, one is met with ceremonies everywhere, as now at the beginnings of the “Education today, society tomorrow” conference and of the Dialogos workshops. More than once, I have been confused as to what my role is in the ceremonies, as here, when asked to “light the lamp”, and when the teacher educators wanted me to sit up front. Most likely, this was not only a personal feeling of shyness. The feeling most likely had cultural-historical roots as well. How?

The word “inauguration” generally means the beginning or introduction of a new programme, a new policy, or new work. In the Indian education tradition, the ritual of the inaugural ceremony marks the start of all educational programmes; in our context, the philosophical dialogue workshop. The term is also commonly used to describe the formal entry of a new person into the workplace, in our context, Guro. The idea behind this practice has always been to inculcate a spiritual dimension to academic life. In this

respect, the inaugural ceremony is meant to help create a mindful and spiritual environment at the beginning of an educational programme.

This spiritual dimension is uncommon in a Norwegian context nowadays. Here, the cultural values of equality and democratic participation are combined with a rather despiritualised and secular public sphere. The Church and State were separated as late as in 1912. From 1814, the Evangelical Lutheran Christian Church had been the state religion. Despite the tight connection between Church and state, the public sphere has become increasingly secular. One aspect of this culture is the demand that all public education, including teacher education, shall be “neutral” when it comes to life views and religion. The idea is partly that all students shall feel included regardless of their culture and religious, and/or spiritual or secular world views. Hence, while I myself experienced morning prayers every day during my first three years of primary school, this is now a forbidden practice since it is not neutral and inclusive. Could it be that this secularized cultural background of mine also contributed to my feeling of unease, not understanding the deeper dimensions of the rather spiritual inauguration ceremony?

The inaugural ceremony contains certain rituals. One of the major rituals is the lighting of the lamp, like Guro was invited to do in episode 1. The intention of this action is to create positivity amongst the learners, with the spreading of divine grace as a hidden aim. Fire is one of the five elements that form our body according to the Indian tradition. It removes darkness and enlightens the lives of humans. The lighting of the lamp symbolizes the awakening of our five senses and is meant to show everyone who is present how to rise upwards and how to dispel darkness. In the educational programme, lighting a lamp is very auspicious, as it kills the impurities of darkness and shows light to a student/devotee, etc. (Sharma, 2009).

Hence, for the second episode, to begin the workshop before the formal inauguration ceremony had been conducted with the Director of the School of Education, Professor Sanjeev Sonawane, present, was thus out of the question. But while all the teacher educators in the room knew *what* we were waiting for and *why*, I did not. Instead, my own personal and cultural-historical background came to the surface in my reactions. While the practices involved in the inauguration ceremony have roots in the gurukul tradition, where the authority of the Guru is central, I come from a culture that at least on the surface level holds social equality regardless of background, gender, and position as one of its main values. For instance, public education, where all students attend the same school with the political intent

to create socio-economic and cultural equality regardless of economic and social background in the population, has been an ideal for policies of education since the late 1800s. The other side of this cultural value of human equality is a scepticism of authority. Both treating others as authorities and being treated as an authority oneself are therefore awkward for many with a Norwegian cultural background. Might these be parts of the background of Guro's feeling of awkwardness with sitting as an authority figure up front waiting for the inauguration ceremony to start? Maybe.

### *Episode 3. Teaching from the podium*

Episode 3 happened towards the end of this first three-day workshop. During the workshop, I had led the participants through a variety of philosophical dialogues and exercises based on the Dialogos approach to wisdom-oriented pedagogy, which I had developed over almost three decades (see Helskog, 2019). I had facilitated dialogical work with the full group sitting and standing, in smaller groups, through individual thinking and sharing in pairs and small groups. In the process, I had let the teacher educators work with topics related both to their professional practice of teaching in teacher education and to their own personal lives, two dimensions which cannot really be separated when working closely with students (see Helskog (Ed.)) forthcoming 2026, especially Helskog et al. 2026 forthcoming). The purpose of this work is the development of deep self-knowledge, intersubjectivity, and wisdom. It involves all six dimensions in my Dialogos model for wisdom-oriented pedagogy: the existential-emotional, the relational-communicative, the critical-analytical, the practical-ethical, the spiritual-ideal, and the cultural-historical dimensions (see Helskog, 2019). Different dimensions are brought to the forefront in different exercises and also in research articles. For instance, while this essay has the cultural-historical wisdom dimension in the forefront, the essay "What does it imply to see a child? On Universal Dimensions in Compassionate Teacher-Student Relationships" (Helskog et al., 2025, Chapter 10 in this anthology) has the existential-emotional and practical-ethical wisdom dimensions in focus.

Now I approached a group of the teacher educators who were philosophising together on one of the many exercises they had been given during the workshop. They welcomed me, saying they had talked about the workshop and about the work they had been doing together during the three days. "The way you have questioned us and made us reflect and think together, and not least the way you organized us in groups and moved

amongst us on the floor level, surprised us”, they said, claiming that “We only teach from the podium”. Their comment puzzled me as well. *What did they mean by teaching from the podium?*

Unfortunately, I did not ask the Indian teacher educators to elaborate there and then, but their question kept itching me. On a surface level, they seemed to be pointing to a difference between modes of teaching that I have often met in Norway as well. Teaching from the podium or from the front desk, in my context often labelled “blackboard teaching” or sometimes also “teacher-led teaching”, has a long tradition in my culture as well, with roots, amongst others, in Christian preaching and the teaching in the medieval Cathedral Schools, educating students to become priests. Moreover, the educational philosophy of Herbart, where the teacher’s main task is seen as transmitting the cultural and historical knowledge of former generations through what might be labelled teaching from the podium, still influences teaching in Norway. Nowadays, an educational theorist like Gert Biesta is advocating traditional forms of teaching, arguing that the practice of so-called student-centred teaching, and thus the focus on learning, has become too dominant (listen to Biesta, et al., 2024).

Teaching from the podium in the Indian context might have British colonial and thus European roots similar to the Christian and Herbartian roots of Norwegian education. My intuition, however, was that the notion and practice of “teaching from the podium” might also have cultural-historical roots in the many thousands of years-old Indian educational tradition. Reflecting upon the experience together with Vaibhav, we have both come to agree that the notion of “teaching from the podium” most likely has roots that are specific to the Indian context.

### *Possible aspects of the cultural-historical meaning of “teaching from the podium”*

In the Vedic period, the place of the Guru’s seating would always be high in the teaching-learning situation, as would the priest in a Christian sermon and the teacher in a traditional school. The guru would sit up front at a podium, and all the students would sit in rows on the ground before him. The most popular teaching-learning practice in the Vedic education system is known as *preaching and discourse*. After fixing a topic, a learned speaker speaks on that topic for a fixed time. This practice is called *Upadesh* (Sharma, 2009). Preaching is like lecturing, but the language of preaching is spiritual. The Guru is considered to have deep and special knowledge.

Therefore, *listening* was the main task of the student in the system of Vedic

philosophy. After listening, the Guru would open up for question-answer, dialogue, debate, discussion, sightseeing, etc.

However, it is important to note that this was not all there is to the teaching of the Guru. On the contrary, a variety of activities were included in the teaching and learning relationship between the Guru and his students. First of all, he was a spiritual teacher, working in the tradition of the Vedas. The name Veda stands for the ‘Mantras’ and the ‘Brahmanas’. ‘Mantra’ means a ‘hymn’ or ‘religious song’ addressed to a god or goddess (Hiriyanna, 2000). Hence, the role of the Guru has been that of a spiritual teacher, as indicated in the name itself, ‘Gu’ meaning *darkness*, and ‘ru’ meaning *remover*. A Guru is thus a “remover of darkness”. The Guru traditionally worked within the *Gurukul system*, implying the educational institute where the spiritual insights were taught. The importance of the Guru and the Gurukul system is shown in this song from the Samaveda (Sharon, 2009):

गुरुब्रह्मा गुरुर्विष्णु गुरुर्देवो महेश्वरः

गुरु साक्षात् परब्रह्मा तस्मै श्रीगुरवे नमः

Gurur Brahmā Gurur Viṣṇur Gurur devo Maheśvaraḥ

Guruḥ sāksāt paraṁ Brahma tasmai śrī gurave namaḥ<sup>1</sup>

Gurur Brahmā Gurur Viṣṇur Gurur devo Maheśvara?

Guruḥ sāksāt paraṁ Brahma tasmai śrī gurave nama?<sup>4</sup>

The Guru was thus the spiritual father of his students. He was an exemplar and an inspirer, a confidant and friend, a philosopher and moral educator, a character and personality builder, a facilitator of learning, and an importer of knowledge and wisdom. During the Vedic period, learning was transmitted orally from one generation to another. Great importance was attached to the proper accent and pronunciation in the Vedic recitation, and these could be correctly learnt only from the lips of a properly qualified teacher.

A Guru lived with his family and his students in a *Gurukula*. The primary duty of the student in this institution was to serve the teacher and his family. The Gurukul education system thus included a variety of activities in a natural environment with the aim of having no harmful impact on society. It included a focus on activities like walks, sports, and yoga, aimed



at the development of the physical health of students. Also, skills like craft, dancing, and singing were emphasized, encouraging an individual to find their passion. In addition to these activities, the students were required to do daily chores on their own, with the aim of developing students' independent temperament and helping them gain skills needed for everyday life. They also worked on personality development and towards increasing their self-confidence, esteem, and intellect. Thus, listening to lectures was only one part of the learning for the students.

Based on the description of the role of the Guru and of the Gurukul system, the notion “teaching from the podium” seems only to refer to one small part of the teaching and learning that went on in traditional Indian education. Yet, while the traditional system is not widely practiced today, except maybe in some yoga ashrams, it did have some dimensions that seem to align well with the philosophical dialogue activities. First of all, it represented a holistic form of education, encompassing not only academic knowledge but also character building and overall moral and personality development of the students. Moreover, it was a personalized form of learning. Both dimensions are at the core of the Dialogos approach to pedagogical-philosophical practice (see Helskog, 2019). This individualized yet collective approach facilitated a deeper understanding of the subject matter and tailored teaching methods to suit the learning style of each student. However, the Gurukul education was not confined to theoretical learning. Students participated actively in various activities, including agricultural work, arts and crafts, and other practical skills. This hands-on approach contributed to a more practical understanding of the world, allowing for learning through the day-to-day interactions and examples set by their Gurus. This helped in the transmission of ethical and cultural values from one generation to the next, and the disciplined lifestyle in a Gurukul, with fixed daily routines and adherence to rules, also helped in instilling a sense of discipline and self-control. Finally, living together in a Gurukul fostered a sense of community and brotherhood among students. This environment promoted collaboration, shared responsibilities, and a strong sense of belonging.

Aspects of this ancient educational practice seem to have similarities with the idea of “learning by doing”, which was popularized by John Dewey but which has roots, amongst others, in Plato (Dewey, 1959; Reese, 2011). The idea has been a central notion in so-called progressive education, both in the USA and in Europe throughout the 20th century. I, Guro, have been inspired by both when working as a teacher in secondary education and

as a teacher educator, and the practice of “teaching by walking around” and engaging with the group on a floor level is, in my world, nothing uncommon and thus nothing revolutionary. The practice of making students philosophise through dialogue, however, is not as common, even though Leonard Nelson introduced this form of practice in university education already in mid-war Germany (see Nelson, 1922/2004), and Matthew Lipman developed his Philosophy for Children (P4C) approach from the late 1960s on (see i.e. Lipman et al. 1980; Lipman, 1988). This practice also surprises many students and colleagues in my own Norwegian context. Also, here, teaching “from the podium”, or at least in front of students who sit in rows behind each other, is not uncommon in my context either.

Here, it is interesting to draw Raphael’s painting “The School of Athens” (1511) into the picture, as it depicts a variety of ways of being in the world and ways of teaching and learning. There are several interpretations of Raphael’s painting, as discussed by Gutman (1941). Throughout this big wall painting in the Vatican, classical figures from the history of philosophy and science are seen, some in eager teaching of their students. Amongst them we find Hypatia, Epicurus, Ibn Rushd, Pythagoras, Parmenides, Diogenes, Heraclitus, Archimedes, Zoroaster, and Ptolemy. In the centre of the painting, Raphael has depicted himself as Plato, a giant persona pointing upwards to the spiritual world of ideas. To his side, the equally giant Aristotle points outwards to the world of human life and empirical, earthly reality. To the left, Socrates is painted in eager dialogue with a group of fellows, and it is not wrong to say that X understood her way of living and teaching dominantly in the educative tradition of Socrates in dialogue, even though I, of course, was deeply inspired both by the Plato who wrote the Socratic dialogues (see Plato u.a.) and by his student, Aristotle, not the least with regards to his conception of practical wisdom (phronesis) (Aristotle, 2004).

The Socratic tradition originated in the idea that it is beyond human capacity to become wise, as wisdom is an unreachable divine ideal for humans. As depicted in the *Apology* (Plato a), the defence speech of Socrates written by Plato around 480 before Christ, the closest one could come to the ideal of wisdom was to realize that existentially speaking, when it comes to virtues and the “highest things”, we can know nothing, and with regards to these, we need to be humble.

In our own time, the Socratic tradition has inspired different ways of philosophising ranging from critical-logical thinking (see Brenifier, 2009) to spiritual contemplation (see Lahav, 2010; Weiss, 2022) and differ-

ent forms of so-called Socratic dialogue developed with inspiration from Leonard Nelson (1922/2004) and Gustav Heckman (1981/2004), for instance, in the approach of Finn Thorbjørn Hansen (2008), being an existential version. Also, the practice of Philosophy for Children (P4C) developed by Matthew Lipman and Ann Margareth Sharp should be mentioned as an important tradition in this landscape. In the Dialogos approach, I draw upon inspiration from different ways of philosophising, arguing that wisdom-oriented pedagogies need to be multi-perspectival and multi-faceted (Helskog, 2009), in line with a kaleidoscopic epistemology (Helskog and Weiss, 2023), yet existentially relational and mystery-oriented.

To sum up: In Episode 3, where the teacher educators expressed fascination and surprise about the Dialogos workshop they were part of, it seemed that Socratic-dialogic-inspired teaching practice met leftover aspects of the Indian Gurukul system, probably combined with British colonial educational influence.

#### ***Episode 4. Touching the teacher's feet***

Episode 4 happened after the closing ceremony at the end of the second three-day Dialogos workshop in October. As both workshops had started with an inaugural ceremony, they also closed with a certificate ceremony in which Dean Sanjeev Sonawane, who at this time had become pro vice chancellor at Savitribai Phule Pune University, played a main role. Each time he was asked to enlighten the participants – (“*Sir – please enlighten us!*”) – before being invited to the podium to give his speech.

When the closing ceremony was over, the group pictures had been taken, and mutual gratitude was exchanged, I noticed two of the male teacher educators and workshop participants approaching me. To me, unexpectedly, they bent down to touch my feet, one at a time. I had seen this done to Professor Sanjeev Sonawane and to the director of a yoga institute, but I was totally unprepared that it was now done to me. I was taken aback for a moment, feeling a bit awkward and embarrassed by this act of respect that was so different from what I am used to in my own cultural context. What was expected of me? What should I have done? The act made me wonder, and again I asked Vaibhav, who was surprised that I did not know.

#### ***The cultural-historical meaning of touching the teachers' feet***

While the first three episodes could have happened in similar surface forms in a Norwegian cultural context as well, the third episode could not.

The practice of bending down to touch the feet of a teacher is a traditional

gesture of respect and reverence in many cultures, especially in South Asia. As per the Vedic tradition and in Hinduism, touching someone's feet is a mark of respect and humility towards knowledge, experience, wisdom, and age. It is an act of acknowledging the teacher's knowledge and wisdom. This practice stems from the belief that knowledge is sacred and that teachers are important in spreading and imparting it. There is an Indian story where a person asks, "If teacher and God are both in front of me, who will I greet first?" The answer of the other is then that "it is only because of the teacher's teaching that I am able to see God". Thus, touching the teacher's feet is a way to express gratitude and honour for their guidance. What I did not know was that I also should have put my hands on the head of the ones touching my feet, giving them my blessing. The act of touching someone's feet is also a way of seeking blessings and good wishes from another person's aura. Positive words like long life', 'may you always be happy', 'may you succeed' or 'be successful' are often expressed the moment one touches someone's feet. This emits positive vibes from the teacher (or the elder if in the family), which are then passed on to those who touch their feet. It symbolizes values of respect, gratitude, a sense of duty, and humility.

This said, in India, the practice of touching the feet is also common within the family. Touching someone's feet can also be an expression of gratitude towards one's parents, grandparents, and other respectable people for their contribution to one's upbringing and well-being, implying the fostering of strong social and family bonds, also signifying cultural identity. It is an age-old tradition from the Vedic period, holding spiritual meaning and considered to be a mark of respect towards the older generations. The thought is that an elder's feet are the source of spiritual energy, and by touching them, one receives blessings that can help in one's personal and spiritual growth. It's a gesture of acknowledging the authority and wisdom of the person, symbolizing the submission of ego, pride, or the complex of the superiority of the one who touches the feet.

The gesture is seen in almost all Hindu families in India as well as those residing in other countries (Arulsamy, 2011). The gesture is called 'Dandavat' in Marathi, 'Charan Sparsh' and 'Sadar Pranam' in Hindi, and 'Pouri Pouna' in Punjabi. These are all commonly used phrases for touching the feet of a person one respects deeply. It simply means *bowing the forehead down and touching the feet of another person*.

## Philosophical meta-reflection

These four small episodes have been sticking with me as those kinds of experiences that I cannot really forget. For the Indians, Episodes 1, 2 and 4 were normal everyday actions that nobody thought about as special, while Episode 3 showed that the teacher educators experienced the Dialogos workshops as something different and unexpected to them. Through the four episodes, we both got what for us seem to be small glimpses into left-over aspects of the Indian Gurukul tradition: the inaugural ceremonies, the teaching from the podium, and the touching of the feet. All four episodes were examples of encounters between practices that have deep cultural-historical roots. The acts and practices convey, as we have seen, spiritual as well as cultural-historical *meaning*, and both our original horizons of understanding were challenged when reflecting culturally-historically upon the episode. Initially, it created a form of *aporia* in me (Guro). *Aporia* is the situation of ‘not knowing’, where Socrates famously ends up with his interlocutors in Plato’s dialogues (2004, u.a.), which is also the point where true philosophising begins. From here, an urge to understand the events initiated a hermeneutical process that was also educative (see Gallagher, 1992) for both of us two authors of the essay. In the words of Gadamer (2010: 305–306): Those who want to understand what a text or another human being (or, in our context, culturally embedded practices) cannot trust his or her own initial and accidental (mis)understanding but need to be open to let it speak to them. And in the research process, the hermeneutical task is to unfold the “miracle of understanding”, which again implies participation in shared meaning (p. 330). If we are to understand such meaning, it is not possible to be neutral spectators observing from the outside. Rather, we need to take the attitude of a *participant* that takes the life world of the other seriously, entering into a dialogue with him or her, like I did when engaging in dialogue with Vaibhav in order to understand the practices I became part of.

Through the reflective practice research approach, I (Guro) took both the workshop participants and Vaibhav seriously as dialogue partners in the attempt to understand the cultural-historical meaning of the episodes. Our attempt to understand can be seen as a philosophical form of research, which can be connected to the etymological meaning of the word “philosophy” – *philo sophia* in Greek. While *philo* means “love/friend”, *sophia* can be translated as “insight/wisdom”, signifying a natural and necessary drive and desire in human beings to know themselves and the world in

which they live (Sharma, 2009). This connects reflective practice and reflective research to traditions with roots in classical philosophies of life, with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle among the underlying inspirational sources, as argued also in the essay *Reflective practice research and kaleidoscopic epistemology* (Helskog and Weiss, 2023). Truth in these traditions is, again, drawing on Gadamer (2010), what is *revealed*, for instance, what comes forth when we have AHA experiences. As Gadamer puts it: Truth is an experience – an event of understanding (2010, p. 348). The Greek notion for this kind of truth is *aletheia*, which is the form of truth that we seek to uncover through certain forms of reflective practice research and that has come forth in our dialogical process of co-writing this essay. For instance, Vaibhav has repeatedly laughed and claimed that he never thought about how practices in India, such as the lighting of the lamp, teaching from the podium, and touching the feet of authorities, whether older family members or teachers, possibly represent leftover practices with roots in the Indian Gurukul tradition. Guro's open questions and their joint reflection brought this "to the light" for him and caused us both to have repeated AHA experiences. Truth, so to speak, happened to us in the process. This is not a final truth or a complete truth. Rather, it is a truth – a new understanding – a glimpse – that happened based on the horizons of understanding that we had at the time, and it is not possible to draw any bold conclusions from what we have done. However, now the same episodes will not have the same confusing effect if or when they happen again next time I conduct a workshop or give a lecture in India. Rather, I will be able to participate with more confidence. Because my repertoire of insight and experiences, my prejudices (Gadamer, 2010), – will have expanded and deepened, it will be possible to make other truth experiences happen which could not have happened to me if I did not have this new insight. In humanistic research (like philosophical reflective practice research), such "truth events" have more in common with the intuition of the artist than with the methodological spirit of the natural and social sciences, Gadamer (1953) argues.

When attempting to understand ourselves and our experiences, we are moved to explore the relationships within which we are enmeshed. When encountering a different cultural web than the one we have embodied, we, so to speak, *meet ourselves*, or rather, we meet our *prejudices* and our *limited horizon of understanding* in our *not understanding* the life and practice of the other(s). It is only by entering into dialogue with the world around us that we are able to understand. Thus, according to Gadamer (1980, p. 62), *all understanding implies self-understanding. Self-understanding always*

occurs through understanding something other than the self and includes the unity and integrity of the other. Anyone trying to understand something is always influenced by his/her culture and time, which gives us certain prejudices. However, these prejudices do not stand in the way of understanding. Rather, it is through the help of our prejudices that we are capable of opening up, and opening ourselves to, what we wish to understand.

Lindseth (2023) argues that while instrumental practice research gives knowledge of facts, reflective practice research gives *orientational* knowledge. The orientational knowledge that might be summarized from this essay is the knowledge that even seemingly small episodes that happen in international collaboration carry not only personal but also cultural-historical meaning that is worthwhile trying to understand. Seeking to understand ourselves and others beyond the personal by looking more closely at the cultural-historical embeddedness of our actions and reactions is important because it might increase our epistemic, practical and relational humility and wisdom. Such humility tells us to seek understanding by entering into dialogue with what surrounds us. It tells us to question rather than take for granted and accept without understanding. It tells us to first listen rather than tell and to be attentive rather than to act thoughtlessly and too quickly. If one wants to understand something, one has to put one's horizon of understanding and prejudices at play and open up to the situation and to what others have to say.

As such, the hermeneutical work in the essay has implied a process of *making the implicit explicit*. This is a never-ending process, yet what have we gained? Not much, many might say, arguing that it is obvious that when you engage in international collaboration, you will find yourself in situations you do not fully understand. Yet if we return to the statement of philosopher Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum et al., 2025) in the beginning of this essay, it is perfectly possible to travel to other countries without learning anything about the culture and practices of those living there, and vice versa: Those living in a country might not learn anything from strangers visiting. As such, we have shown how deep mutual understanding and learning might emerge, as long as we are willing to put our original horizons of understanding at play through open questioning and dialogue, with humans as well as with literature. Our intention has thus simply been to encourage people engaged in international collaboration to go deeply into even small incidents and experiences. The incidents may convey implicit cultural-historical roots that are well worth making explicit for all involved. By doing so, those engaging in such work (as well as the reader

ers of the written outcomes of such work) may *improve their understanding* and develop *orientational knowledge* that can help them and others act with greater wisdom in practical situations later.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Guro Hansen Helskog holds a position as professor of pedagogy at the University of South-Eastern Norway. She developed the Dialogos approach to philosophical practice from 2004 on and has published several books and research articles both in Norwegian and English, amongst them *Philosophising the Dialogos Way towards Wisdom in Education. Between Critical Thinking and Spiritual Contemplation* (Routledge, 2019). Together with Michael Noah Wise, she is co-hosting the *ResponsAbility Podcast*.
- <sup>2</sup> Vaibhav Jadhav is an Associate Professor at Savitribai Phule Pune University, holding a PhD in education. Jadhav is particularly interested in global citizenship education, the internationalization of teacher education, mixed methods and microlearning strategies.
- <sup>3</sup> The visit and also the Dialogos project, within which the philosophical dialogue was reflected upon in this essay, were part of the projects *Quality in Teacher Education – Joining Forces through Internationalisation* (JOIN) and *Teacher Education for Sustainable Futures in India and Norway* (TeachIN). Associate Professor Åsmund Aamaas was the coordinator from the University of South-Eastern Norway, and Professor Sanjeev Sonawane was the coordinator from Savitribai Phule Pune University. Both projects were funded by the Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills (HK-Dir) through the NOTED programme (JOIN 2017–2024) and UTFORSK (TeachIN 2022–2025), respectively.
- <sup>4</sup> Translated to English, it says that our creation is *Guru Brahma* – the force of creation. The duration of our lives is *Guru Vishnu* – the force of preservation. Our trials, tribulations, illnesses, calamities and the death of the body are *Guru devo Maheshwara* – the force of destruction or transformation. And finally, there is a guru nearby, *Guru Sakshat*, and a Guru that is beyond the beyond, *param Brahma*. Finally, it says that I make my offering – *tasmai* – to the beautiful – *shri* – remover of my darkness, my ignorance, and it is to you *Guru*, I bow and lay down my life – *namah*.

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## CHAPTER 10: ON UNIVERSAL DIMENSIONS OF COMPASSIONATE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

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### Abstract

*The question explored in this essay is “What does it imply to see a child?” Through a reflective practice research approach and the methods of Dialogos comparative dialogue and written reflections from participants, the authors share concrete experiences of seeing a child or being seen when they were a child themselves. The phenomenon of teachers seeing behind the immediate behavior and actions of the children and then taking proper and ethically sound action is drawn out as essential. In the theoretical reflection, the concepts of “empathic communication”, “the tolerance window”, “regulation,” and “phronesis” are drawn into the exploration of the healing dimensions of love and compassion in teacher-student relationships. The purpose of the philosophical dialogue, as well as of the reflective practice research, is to develop orientational knowledge.*

### Key words

Compassion – healing – philosophising the Dialogos Way – philosophical dialogue – teacher-student relationships

### Introduction

In his book “The Ethical Demand”<sup>4</sup>, the Danish philosopher Knut Løgstrup (2020 [1956]) argues that a person never has something to do with another human being without holding some of the person’s life in his hand. It can be very little, he states. A transient mood, an obviousness that one makes wither, or which one deepens or raises. But it can also be an awful lot, so it simply depends on the individual whether the other person’s life succeeds

or not. This passage has become something like a cliché in Nordic pedagogical literature, but in the context of international collaboration, it is worth revisiting. A teacher is a person who, whether s/he is aware of it or not, is holding some of their students' lives in their hands, sometimes to the degree that their lives are profoundly changed for the better (or worse) by the teacher.

During my visit to the Scholars Foundation High School in Panchgani, India, founder and rector Celine proved to be a person who had not only understood this but also taken action in ways beyond the capacity of most people. In a few sentences during our conversation, she had synthesised the essence of her educational philosophy: As a child, she had been in deep need of being *seen* in ways that could make her feel loved by the adults around her. However, they were simply not able to. Therefore, love is now at the core of her educational practice, she said, having more than 100 of the 600 children aged 5–17 living in two hostels belonging to the school, some of them orphans, some of them from homeless conditions in India. Whenever she sees that a child is in need of a hug or a comforting lap, she is there for this child. Whenever they face a problem, she helps solve it. The love includes demanding discipline and hard work, and that the students to take responsibility for the school community. Through her works of love, she and the other teachers and staff at the school have transformed countless lives.

Inspired by Celine's vision, I decided to let the participants of the Dialogos philosophical dialogue programme with teacher educators<sup>5</sup> from 12 colleges in Pune, India, explore the question "What does it imply to *see* a child?" during our fifth day together. The programme was part of the JOIN and TeachIN projects involving the University of South-Eastern Norway and Savitribai Phule Pune University. The workshops had included several philosophical and dialogical exercises drawn from *Philosophising the Dialogos Way towards Wisdom in Education* (Helskog, 2019), facilitated with the intent to make the teacher educators capable of trying out similar exercises with their own students in between and after the workshops. The particular comparative Dialogos dialogue that is reflected upon in this essay was facilitated on the second day of the October workshop. The dialogue constitutes the first part of the reflective practice research structure used to investigate the question of seeing a child in this essay. This means that all the philosophical dialogue participants are co-researchers in this essay. However, only Dipali Mehakarkar and Chaitali G. Sinha are referred to as direct co-authors with their narrated experiences and their contribution to

the critical and theoretical reflection upon their own examples. Hereafter, we are all referred to by our first names.

### **Stage one: The comparative Dialogos dialogue**

The comparative dialogue format is maybe the format that has become the most important key to “philosophising the Dialogos way”. The comparative process implies a clear movement from concrete, individual, personal, experiential, particular, and unique *examples* towards more general, conceptual, universal, and abstract levels of understanding. The main purpose of the essay is to explore the question “What does it imply to *see* a child?” based on both the *methodos* of moving from concrete to critical reflection in the comparative Dialogos dialogue and in a more general theoretical reflection in this essay. This is in line with the reflective practice research approach, which takes its point of departure in the philosophy of science stance claiming that we are always embedded in cultural and cosmic webs of relationships and that neither objectivity nor subjectivity is possible in their pure forms (see Lindseth, 2015). Therefore, it is justifiable for the researcher to take his or her point of departure in practical experience, which is narrated and explored through critical as well as theoretical reflection.

### ***Background for the choice of philosophical question***

When conducting a Dialogos dialogue process, I am always open to what comes up as important during a workshop. Now, being inspired by Celine and her educational philosophy, I suggested that we now take some time to contemplate and explore the question, “What does it imply to *see* a child?” Truly seeing another person, whether a child or an adult, is probably a sign of love in education, I suggested, and the participants agreed. But what did it really mean, and what does it really look like?

### ***Finding, formulating, and sharing personal examples – a philosophical exercise in itself***

I thus asked participants to find and formulate a personal example of one time in their lives where they experienced *being seen as a child themselves* or where they were the adult who *saw a child*. Finding personal experiences and formulating personal examples might seem easy, but repeatedly, I have experienced that this is not the case. First, it is a rather advanced skill, and

something most people, whether in India or in the Nordic countries, are not used to doing. Using a question formulated based on an abstract and general concept, in this case “seeing a child”, then “scanning” one’s own pool of experiences for concrete incidents that can be used as examples, then choosing the one best suited, is in itself a philosophical exercise, connecting the abstract and the concrete, the general and the personal, and the universal and the particular. In this case, some of the teacher educators claimed that they were unable to find examples. To help them with their thinking and exemplification task, I decided to narrate one of my own concrete examples.

### ***Guro’s exemplification – an experience of “seeing a child”***

The incident happened some 15–20 years ago, when I worked as a teacher in a secondary school in Norway. One of the students in this class was rather grumpy, not wanting to participate in teaching-learning activities, rather being silently aggressive and angry. One day the class was to take a group photo, and we all went outside. Then this student caught me and said that s/he did not want to be part of the photo. I encouraged her/him, and s/he finally took place amongst the others. However, shortly after, the student came by me again, exclaiming that she did not want to do this, and then went inside.

Since we were quite a few teachers on this day, I could run after the student. The door to the classroom was closed, and I opened it slowly, seeing the teenager sitting by the desk, arms folded, with a closed, angry look. From the doorway, I silently mentioned the student’s name, asking carefully, “I wonder if you might be sad about something?” Then s/he started crying. Slowly, I sat down next to the student. S/he talked about her/his life situation and about what was bothering her/him about being part of the class picture.

After this incident, our relationship transformed completely. The student showed trust in me, and whatever task was given to the class, this student was among the most eager to do her/his best. From this day on, our eyes met on a regular basis, confirming our mutual bond. The students knew I *saw* him/her.

Now all the participants were able to find examples of seeing or being seen. Hence, it was not that they did not have such experiences. It was rather that they were seldom asked to find and narrate such experiences. The reason for this is probably to be found in the cultural-historical webs we find ourselves situated in. The cultural webs of Indian and Nordic teacher ed-

ucators are likely to have both differences and similarities. One similarity might be that the educational systems are grounded in Enlightenment ideas of science and philosophy. For instance, from Descartes on, there has been a separation between subject and object, concrete and abstract, and between experience and philosophy. For instance, Hegel ([1807]1979) argues that storytelling is not philosophy, even when encountered in Plato. To him, *the concept* constitutes the scientific in our thinking. Ideals of objectivity and neutrality have thus been central in education modelled after the Enlightenment ideas. Teacher educators are not necessarily used to the practice of exemplifying general concepts by drawing on their own experience. Thinking abstractly and on an opinionated level seems to be much easier for people than thinking concretely and from personal experience. However, used in a Dialogos philosophical group dialogue, the role of personal experience is that of *concretization*, *exemplification*, and *self-investigation* on the side of the person finding and formulating the example, and that of *phenomenological*, *hermeneutical*, and *empathic perspective-taking* on the side of the dialogue participants listening to and engaging with the examples of each other. This might not be "philosophy", but it is indeed an important element in "philosophizing", i.e. in the activity of searching out wisdom (*philo* = love/friend, *sophia* = wisdom/word).

### **Concrete reflection: Participants' experiences of "seeing a child"**

In order to save some time, I divided the full group of 17 teacher educators into four smaller groups of four to five members. The members of the smaller groups then shared their experiences with the other group members, one by one, while the others were instructed to listen carefully without commenting or asking questions at this stage. When everyone had shared their experiences, I asked if someone had a good example that they would share with everyone in the group. With the encouragement from her group members, Dipali, for this reason one of the co-authors of this essay, told her story. Dipali has written the story out in detail for this essay:

#### ***Dipali's example***

After completing my Master of Education (M.Ed.) degree, I joined a school as a teacher. In school, I used to teach subjects like English, geography, and ICT for secondary classes. Sometimes we needed to engage the free period



of any class, as the concerned teacher was not present on that particular day. Therefore, one day, I went to a 5<sup>th</sup>-grade class to engage their free period. I had to maintain discipline in the class by conducting some activities, so I decided to conduct a general knowledge-based quiz. I instructed the students about quiz rules, divided the class into groups, and started to conduct the quiz. While conducting, I noticed a boy who was tall and seemed like he was not a student of the 5<sup>th</sup> grade; he looked older than his other classmates. Also, I noticed that in one moment, he became aggressive and started shouting at other students, and the next moment, he was silently listening to us. I felt that something was wrong with that boy, so I inquired with the other students of the same class about him. They said that his behavior was like that only.

The next day, I inquired about him in the staff room. Teachers said that ‘only the boy was like that’, ‘he doesn’t understand things like others’, ‘his notebooks were not completed’, ‘he used to spend more than 2 years in one class’, etc. Afterwards, I visited him and checked his notebooks. I observed that his handwriting in the notebooks was not good in some places and surprisingly good at some places. This made me more curious about the boy’s situation, so I decided to communicate about this with his parents with my supervisor’s permission. Then I finally met his mother on the weekend and discussed this whole thing with her.

She shared that due to an incident, he had built up trauma inside him, which was the main reason for his behavior that they see in school. I insisted that she please share it with me. She then told me that two years back, when their family had gone for a vacation to their hometown, there was a sudden robbery in the house, and as their father was trying to resist the robbers from looting, the robbers suddenly attacked his father, which caused his father to pass away. I was obviously shocked by hearing all this and felt sorry for her and her family, especially the boy, but her next words were even more shocking; she said that this scene was witnessed by him, and that caused him greater trauma, which ultimately led him to fall into trust issues. The only way he could learn or concentrate was when he was with his mom or if she was teaching him. She said that he only listens to her and can get hyper if any other person imposes upon him to do something; this was also why he was not getting good grades and had to repeat the same class. I assured her that I would find a way to help her as well as him.

I discussed this situation with my supervisor and every teacher in the classroom, and after our meeting, we came up with the solution that we will write down the homework or whatever has happened in the class, basically

whatever has been taught, in his diary and give it to him. After going home, he would give that diary to his mother, and she would teach him according to the points and instructions given in the diary. Also, his mother visited us every alternate day to know about how to teach certain things to him; we guided her accordingly. We waited for some time for the changes to be seen, and we were right; we started noticing them within a month. It started small but was fine, as his notebooks, which used to be empty or shabby, were neatly completed with consistent good handwriting. If asked questions in the class, he used to give answers, not immediately, but eventually, and he also learned to slowly control his emotions.

After two months, after their exams, we could also see a drastic change in his grades that went high according to his ability, and finally, he passed that year with good grades and confidence. He had slowly started to learn to trust others, thus also overcoming his trust issues.

Now that I look back, I feel that it was a great success for us as well as that boy who gained his confidence, and I was able to detect what was inside a child's heart and solve it. I personally think that there is no greater success for a teacher than to see students succeed by analysing what's going on in their mind and heart.

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Everyone was listening carefully while Mehakarkar was telling her story of *seeing* a child. They were then instructed to ask her phenomenological questions to elaborate on her story so that they could better understand it and take her perspective. Ideally, they would, metaphorically speaking, put themselves in her shoes. I then asked if someone had an example that was very different from Dipali's example. Chaitali then came forward and shared her experience. Here she has written it out in detail:

### *Chaitali's example*

I recall the days when I was in 2<sup>nd</sup> standard. I was a girl whose both parents were working and an elder brother who was visually impaired. I was a soft and timid girl who shouldered the responsibility of helping my mother and being a companion for my brother. My sense of responsibility made me even more mature than I was supposed to be at that age.

My brother was bullied due to his impairment. It was often physical. Other kids used to push and hit him from behind and verbally say hurtful things. I used to be very sad whenever I saw him suffer or when he shared his suffering with me. When I was with my brother, other students used to

say things that, as a 7-year-old, made me cry. Being younger than his classmates, I feared them and never tried to fight back. Also, we seldom used to share with our mother, considering she would be worried. Due to this, the situation got even worse. His classmates started bullying him even more. One day, while I was in my English class, one of his friends came and informed me that a boy had hit my brother with his belt; the metal part of that belt hit his head. He was bleeding profusely. I did not know what had happened to me, and I just ran out of my class without the teacher's permission. I hit that boy very hard and slapped and kicked him several times. In the meantime, other students called the principal. He saw me hitting the boy. My brother was taken to the first aid centre near the school, and I to the Principal's office. Principal sir and the other teachers were very angry with me. They decided to severely punish me for my action. They also decided to call our parents to the school. By then, I started to feel so ashamed and frightened that I could not even say anything.

My English teacher was called after her class was over. The principal also wanted her to blame and scold me. Instead of doing so, my teacher looked at me and said she did this because she loves and protects her brother. If that boy had not hit her brother, she would not have done this. It's not her fault we are accusing the wrong one. We should question that boy about why he hit her brother with a belt. Everyone then started to understand the background of my action. I was not punished; my mother did not get a call from the school.

Later, my English teacher called me alone and told me I could talk to her freely and share our problems. I shared with her how my brother and I were being bullied by his classmates. I also told her why we could not tell our parents about all these instances. Listening to my story, she advised that I must be strong and open if I wanted to protect my brother and myself from bullying. From then onwards, until I was in school, she was the one with whom I shared the most. Because of the courage she gave me when it was needed most, I transformed into an upright person. She shaped my life and made me mentally and emotionally strong to face life's challenges. I cannot forget her ever.

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Everyone was listening carefully, also while Chaitali G. Sinha was telling her story of being *seen* as a child, followed by the phenomenological indwelling of her story by asking her questions to elaborate on her story so that they could better understand her experience and take her perspective.

Comparison is one of the basic philosophical activities, as it demands that the dialogue participants rise above the stories told, engaging in *conceptualization*. According to Brenifier (2009), a concept is an intellectual representation that captures the theme or the prominent idea in an utter-

ance, or here – an experience narrated as a story. We could also call it the “keyword” or “key expression”, which is drawn out through the dynamic process of conceptualization. This is, according to Brenifier (2009), the activity of recognizing, producing, defining and utilizing concepts, integrated in a global thinking process consisting of an action of reduction. Conceptualization is a movement from

“the concrete to the abstract, from the multiple to the simple, from the actual to the virtual, from the perceptible to the thinkable, from entities inscribed in time, matter and space, to acosmic, immaterial and intemporal entities: we enter the realm of pure ideas, the realm of thinking the thinking”.

Crystallizing differences and similarities can thus be seen as acts of conceptualization. Each difference suggested was problematised and supported by reasons before being conceptualized and written in a scheme on the board. The concepts extracted by the participants of the dialogue are transcribed and presented in Table 1. Hence, they are all co-researchers in this essay<sup>6</sup>. The differences were abstracted and crystallized as follows:

*Table 1. Differences*

Dipali’s experience	Chaitali’s experience
Dipali was the adult who saw the child in the situation	Chaitali was the child who was seen by the adult in the situation
Dipali who was the teacher, acted for the benefit of the wounded child	The role of the adult for the benefit of Chaitali, who was the wounded child
The boy’s PTSD struggles were recognized by Dipali	The teacher’s outburst of anger was recognized by the teacher
Dipali showed sympathy with the boy	The teacher showed empathy with Chaitali
The students indirectly helped the teacher by the group of teachers working with one another, supporting the board teacher	Chaitali was directly helped by the teacher who connected personally with her – BOND between teacher and Chaitali
Dipali in her career was to support the boy’s academic development	The teacher’s primary concern was to protect and support Chaitali emotionally
Dipali is taking ACTION in an ongoing situation	Teacher REACTING to an incident where Chaitali was involved
Had a clear objective	No clear objective – no relationship grew out of an incident
Several teachers collaborated on the boy’s development	The contact took responsibility for Chaitali alone

**Table 1. Differences**

The boy became increasingly independent and in less need of support	Longitudinal support (“1–12” grade)
Mode of narrative – case study	Chaitali’s role as a sister was crucial
Long process of trust building	The incident created strong trust bond
The boy was weak due to trauma	Chaitali was strong as a child, protecting her brother

Dipali suggests that a possible answer to the question “*What does it imply to see a child?*” in her example implies a process of

1. observing the child’s behavior and performance in school, sensing that something is wrong
2. feeling an inner drive and urge to help the boy
3. Communicating with the boy and his mother in order to know more about the reasons for the student’s behavior and inability to perform well in school
4. understanding the boy’s pain and problem
5. finding a way to help the boy and bring things back to normal

Similarly, Chaitali suggests that a possible answer to the question “*What does it imply to see a child?*” in her example implies the process of

1. Understanding the underlying factors behind the child’s behavior.
2. making the child trust that she is loved and accepted.
3. making the child understand that their opinions are respected
4. supporting the child in becoming emotionally stable over time

, bringing out the best of the personality so that the child becomes independent in every possible way.

In the comparative dialogue itself, when we had explored differences and conceptualized them, I asked the group of teacher educators to now focus on similarities. Like with the differences, each similarity suggested was problematised and supported by reasons before being conceptualized and written on the board. The participants came up with the following similarities, many of them overlapping with the synthesis made by Sinha and Mehakarkar above:

**Similarities**

Both experiences were examples of situations where ...

- the dyad between school/teachers-student/family was involved
- biological relationships were involved (mother-son / brother-sister)

- The actions taken depended on the teachers using their instinct and intuition
- The actions taken depended on the fact that the background of the children's struggles was made explicit
- The actions taken were based on discovering that there was a logic behind the behavior of the children
- The actions taken were founded in the moral values of the teacher
- The empathy and sympathy of the teacher were at the core of the actions taken
- The students were dependent on adult support for change to come about
- The actions taken implied nurturing the children's emotional and existential being
- the relationships that developed involved bonding love
- The relationships that developed involved trust between the child and the adults
- The longitudinal involvement and care of the teacher lead to the transformation of students' lives
- the students could gradually overcome their inabilities and trauma
- teachers were role models of *good* teachers
- it all ended as success stories, even though the sad backgrounds, respectively of having his father killed and having a brother who was bullied because of his visual impairment, did not change.

Common to the two experiences is that the children in the stories are in deep need of adult support, and luckily, they receive it because they had teachers who *saw* behind their external behaviors and sensed that the reason for their behavior lay hidden in the existential and emotional realm of their being. The boy had experienced the trauma of seeing his father being killed by intruders in his home, giving him severe trauma reactions that prevented him from trusting anyone but his mother. A one-time incident in a childhood that in all other respects seemed loving had left him emotionally and mentally scattered. He was not able to keep up with the work at school, and he was acting rather aggressively until Dipali started to question what might lie behind the behavior of the boy. From that day on, long-term work to help the boy started, involving collaboration between several teachers as well as the boy's mother.

Chaitali, on the other hand, was living in a situation where she and her bullied brother protected her parents from worries by not telling them what happened to them at school. Thus, even though her parents were loving, they did not know what was going on, and the children were secretive until

the day Chaitali attacked the boy for hitting her brother with a belt. She was about to be punished when her teacher came to her rescue, seeing behind the action she was about to be scolded for and placing the responsibility where it belonged. From this moment on, the teacher continued to support Chaitali.

Unlike the boy in Dipali's story, who experienced a one-time incident that traumatized him badly, Chaitali lived in a situation of constant bullying by her brother and herself. The boy and Chaitali were both *seen* by their teachers, who took action in accordance with the pain and struggles they saw behind the outer behavior of the kids. Through their longitudinal actions to support the children in ways that implied that the children *themselves* felt seen and thus understood, a healing process started for both children.

If we are to synthesize two key phenomena rising out of these two examples, it seems that the phenomenon of *understanding the existential and emotional reality of the child behind its observable actions* is primary in the act of seeing a child, while the phenomenon of *taking action in such a way that it supports the child's development and growth* follows as a next step.

### **Theoretical reflection: On seeing and taking action**

It can certainly be discussed whether the phenomenon of *taking action* is going beyond the phenomenon of *seeing*, but since our examples here involve teachers seeing students, it follows that if teachers see and understand, it is part of his or her duty to take action. It might thus be argued that in the professional lives of teachers, the two phenomena cannot be separated. Seeing and understanding *rightly*, like both Dipali and the teacher in Chaitali G Sinha's example did, is a prerequisite for *right action*. If the teachers who wanted to punish Chaitali for defending her brother had continued to dominate the situation, who knows how the life of Chaitali would have developed from this incident on? Moreover, if Dipali Mehakarkar had not start to investigate the life situation of the boy, involving her team of co-teachers as well as the mother, who knows how the life of the boy would have developed? Hence, we are here at a point where the words of Danish philosopher Knut Løgstrup, which introduced this essay, become deeply meaningful: "*The individual never has anything to do with another human being without holding some of the person's life in his hand*".



This actualizes the practical-ethical wisdom dimension in the Dialogos approach (Helskog, 2019), which, with reference to the notion of *phronesis* (practical wisdom) in Aristotle, implies developing the ability to act with sensibility and good intentions in concrete situations, ideally doing the right thing in the right way at the right time toward the right people for the right purposes. This will be explored further in the following theoretical reflection section.

How, exactly, can teachers' practical-ethical wisdom of *seeing* the children and *acting* in ways that were of life-transforming support to the children be understood? To explore this question, we will mainly draw on the concepts of "empathic communication" (Brudal, 2014), of "the tolerance window" and "regulation" (Nordanger, 2017), and on the Aristotelian concept of "*phronesis*" as interpreted by Norwegian philosopher Olav Eikeland (2006). Because we do not read Greek, and Eikeland does, we chose to trust his reading rather than using a translated version of Aristotle. By doing so, we let experiences made in an Indian-cultural school context be reflected upon by using theory developed or interpreted within a Norwegian cultural context. This way, the essay itself might be seen as a piece of intercultural dialogue, while also making visible the general or even universal aspects involved in *seeing a child*.

### ***On seeing a child***

The tolerance window is a model that says that all human beings have an activation zone where they feel comfortable and where it is optimal for them to be. When the person is inside this tolerance window, s/he is safe and "in place", ready to explore, play, and learn. However, when the activation in the body is too high, and the person is stressed, upset, angry, or worried, the person is what in this theory is called *hyperactivated*. Here, the person is likely to go into the *fight- flight- or freeze* spectrum. That means that the person instinctively will want to attack/fight or flee the situation. Or, if neither is possible, the only solution is to freeze. At other times the activation in the body is too low, and the person becomes *hypoactivated*, meaning the person is likely to be indifferent, apathetic, and not present in the current situation due to it. Comparing the two examples, it seemed that the boy in Dipali's example was struggling with different modes of hyper- and hypoactivation, while the incident in Chaitali G Sinha's situation activated her fight mode.

Nordanger argues that the tolerance window is a universal and general model that is relevant to all human beings, regardless of culture and background, because we all have a window for what we can tolerate and endure before we become hyper- or hypoactivated. During a day, we are all inside and outside our tolerance window. Most adults, however, have established strategies that make it possible for us to regulate ourselves back into our tolerance window so that we come back to some kind of balance. Children, however, have limited capacity to do this by themselves. Being a small child is more or less the same as having a very narrow tolerance window, Nordanger (2017) argues. A newborn child who is hungry, scared, in pain, or in other ways suffering invites us to comfort and calm them in certain ways that are similar all over the world. A child cannot calm itself before it has repeated experiences of being calmed by an adult. As caring adults, we *see* the need of the child behind their expressions of discomfort and answer their invitation with certain types of rich, rhythmic, tactile, and musical sense experiences which touch all the child's senses. We cradle them, hum and sing to them; we give them eye contact and funny faces; we communicate and play with them. In such situations of adult comforting efforts, strong connections between sense experience and safety are made in the mind of the child. From this basis of experiencing being comforted and having their emotions regulated by an adult, children learn to regulate themselves and their own emotions and actions. Some children, however, grow up in situations where adults, for different reasons, are unable to see the children's needs and help regulate their emotions. They never had the sensitive regulatory support of adults to help calm them and comfort them and help them expand their tolerance window when they struggled as children. They were not seen. Instead of being comforted, maybe they were punished or overlooked. Maybe nobody noticed their inner discomfort, so they gave up trying to communicate it. Such children will have difficulties developing self-regulation strategies, i.e., strategies that make it possible for them to help themselves calm down when brought out of balance. Hence, their tolerance window might remain narrow and limited. These children are also likely to have difficulties regulating themselves later in life.

In our examples, it seemed that the boy had a good basis of trust and regulatory comfort in his mother from the time before witnessing intruders kill his father. However, his trust in people generally was severely distorted after this terrifying experience. Until his teacher Dipali Mehakarkar found out about the boy's situation and traumatic experience, the only safe space in his life after the attack seemed to be with his mother. Hence, in the boy's

case, the tolerance window had suddenly been narrowed due to the unexpected traumatizing event that happened to him, causing him to struggle with suspicion, lack of concentration, etc., meaning he struggled with self-regulation. If he had not met the supportive teachers who were able to help regulate his mental state in such a way that he gradually became more independent, his repertoire for self-regulation might have remained limited, despite the heroic efforts of his mother.

In Chaitali's case, the siblings were trying to protect, comfort, and regulate each other until this day, when Chaitali had become furious and attacked the children who bullied her brother. This was also the day when the teacher *saw* the struggles behind her behavior and took long-term action to offer her comfort, and through this helped develop her ability to regulate her emotions.

Both children experienced an expansion of their tolerance windows and thus increased independence through the longitudinal help of their teachers. They were children who experienced that the adults understood that their behavior expressed an underlying pain. The adults were also able to establish existential, empathic contact with them (Brudal, 2014). Such contact happens beyond language, as "moments of meeting" (Buber, 2004). Children are dependent on adults taking responsibility for their situation. It is obvious that in the case of the boy in Dipali's example, he could not have found his way out of the entrapment without the help of the teachers. His mother helped him as best as she could, but she too needed the support from the teachers. It is also obvious that in the case of Chaitali, she was dependent on the fact that the teacher understood what had happened in the incident and *saw* her struggles and inner pain. She had no chance of making her school days better by herself. The adults at the school needed to take responsibility and create the safe spaces that the children needed.

Hence, children must first be helped by adults in order to be able to help themselves. If they have received such help, they will be more likely to develop bodily knowledge about how they can regulate themselves and consciousness about these processes. Then things that earlier were stressful become familiar and possible to handle. The healing process of the children implied developing a higher degree of emotional stability, which again led to better mental health for them. When human beings are going through tough phases in life, it is difficult, and for children, rather impossible, to stay grounded. Even minor stressors can cause anxiety. During such times, human beings experience a narrower tolerance window than at times when they are more in balance. When having come to a state where the person

feels safe and in emotional balance, and the tolerance window is wider, it is possible to reflect upon, explore, process, and integrate the difficult experiences. Moreover, a deeper understanding of the range of emotional intensities they experienced during the tough time can be developed. This again might lead to deeper wisdom in life. When operating within the tolerance window, they can more effectively manage and cope with emotion and stress.

This, Nordanger (2017) argues, is the universal recipe for children's healthy development. For this to happen, however, a basic sense of safety and trust needs to be developed in the child. Children who have established trust that they will receive help when they need it will be more able to further develop their repertoire by themselves compared to children who do not trust that they will get such help. When Dipali had seen the boy, and Chaitali had been seen by her teacher, the gradual active work to help them expand their tolerance windows started, leading both children to greater independence over time. This leads us to the next theme extracted through the critical reflection section, namely that of *acting* in ways that were of life-transforming support to the children.

### ***On taking action***

One thing was the teachers *seeing* the children in ways that made the children *feel* seen and cared for. Another thing was that the teachers *took action* based on what they saw. This actualizes the practical-ethical wisdom dimension in the Dialogos model, which is about practical knowledge, not so much in terms of the know-how of the teachers in our examples, but in the sense of *phronesis*, also often translated as practical wisdom, prudence, virtuosity or even mindfulness (see Helskog and Weiss, 2023), or as Halås et al. (2015: 9) put it, “the experienced professional is often capable of intuitively judging what a situation demands, and then act in accordance with this in a wise manner”. According to the interpretation of Norwegian philosopher Olav Eikeland (2006), *phrônêsis* in Aristotle is both one of the intellectual virtues or excellences of the mind and an ethical virtue as well. Aristotle claims that we cannot be (intellectually) *prudent* (*phrónimoi*) without being (ethically) *good*, Eikeland (2006) argues. We cannot act virtuously without exercising *phrônêsis*. Except for theoretical wisdom (*sophía*), Eikeland claims, the other intellectual virtues are rational powers that apparently can be used for both good and bad ethical purposes.

However, every ethical and intellectual virtue is the result of a process of

perfection that makes a person able to perform a task or function in the best possible way. The virtues are neither written nor unwritten rules, nor are they merely “attitudes”, Eikeland (2006) holds, stating that the modern word “virtuosity” (and even “excellence”) actually carries the original meaning of phronesis better than “virtue”, since it is more activity-oriented than attitude-oriented.

The teachers in the two examples seemingly acted with a greater degree of phronesis than many of their colleagues, as they were the ones who interpreted the situation correctly, saw the children, and took action in a way that proved to be among the best possible for the healthy development of the two troubled children. Moreover, they stood by the children and acted to support them as long as needed for the children to, metaphorically speaking, stand on their own feet. With the help of the wise actions of the teachers, the tolerance windows of the children were gradually widened, and their self-regulation abilities developed.

### **Meta-reflection: What does it imply to see a child?**

The question we set out to explore through the reflective practice research process of this essay was “What does it imply to see a child?” The methods of comparative philosophical dialogue as well as written theoretical reflections and the experiences of Indian co-authors Dipali Mehakarkar and Chaitali Ghosh Sinha were first explored critically, synthesizing the phenomena of, respectively, *seeing* behind the immediate behavior and actions of the child by tuning in to their emotional and existential state of being and then taking proper *action*, doing what is right in the situation. In the theoretical reflection section, we applied the concepts of “empathic communication”, “the tolerance window”, “regulation” and “phronesis”, as these are developed or interpreted by Norwegian scholars, in the interpretation and reflection upon the phenomena. As a final afterthought, we can say that the lives of these children lay in the hands of their teachers. Their *seeing* and *acting upon what they saw* were life-changing for the children.

In his famous book “I and Thou” (1992 [1923]), Martin Buber distinguishes between two basic attitudes in human life: the *I-Thou* (you) and the *I-It* relationship. The world appears differently to the person who relates to others and to phenomena in the world through an objectifying I-It relationship than to the person who relates to others in an I-Thou relationship.

I-Thou relationships are pure encounters of one whole unique entity with

another equally whole unique entity in such a way that the other is known without being subjected to a universal principle or to classification or limitation. Dipali's and Chaitali's experiences, respectively, with their student and with their teacher can be characterized as I-Thou relationships. Moreover, in the process of telling the stories of their experiences, they related to the other philosophical dialogue participants as "Is" to "Thous", and vice versa. As Buber puts it, the I in an "I-Thou" relation *participates* in a living, dynamic, and dialogical process in which "the You" is an equal participant.

In contrast, the "I-It" relation is driven by the need to categorize phenomena under interpretations of "same" and "different", focusing on universal definitions and principles. Wasn't this what we did in this particular, comparative Dialogos dialogue? And in the theoretical reflection section in this essay, did we not subject the experiences of their relationship, respectively, to their student and to their teacher under universal principles?

We did, but in the dialogue process, only after the participants had found and formulated an experience, told it, and contemplated it together with the rest of the group in profound I-Thou relationships. As such, the participants experienced two attitudes, which created two qualitatively different experiences of the phenomena. When analysing the experiences through comparison, the I in the analytical "I-It" relation needed to *detach* from the narrated experience, fixing in time and space. However, since the whole group participated in shared thinking and dialogue about the experiences, the relationship became three-jointed, as Skjervheim (1976) would express it. Therefore, while the "I" of the "I-It" relation is a self-enclosed individual, both participants in an "I-Thou" relation exist as polarities of relation whose centre lies *in the between*. The in-between participants in the philosophical dialogues were the narrated experiences of Dipali and Chaitali. Buber sees the "I" as a developing and ongoing achievement, a self that can become either more fragmentary or more unified through its relationships to others. In the philosophical dialogue, there was first a unifying process going on, then a fragmenting process when looking for differences, then a unifying process again when looking for commonalities. In Buber's understanding, the human being becomes whole through a relation to another self, not in a self-enclosed mode of being. Thus, even though there was both categorization, comparison and generalization going on, this was done in collaboration between the participants. Their "I"s thus developed and expanded in the I-Thou dialogue, focusing on the in-between.

The characteristics of Buberian dialogical I-Thou relationships were all at

play: mutual respect, mutual exchange in language, and mutual unification through shared efforts.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Guro Hansen Helskog holds a position as professor of pedagogy at the University of South-Eastern Norway. She developed the Dialogos approach to philosophical practice from 2004 on and has published several books and research articles both in Norwegian and English, amongst them *Philosophising the Dialogos Way towards Wisdom in Education. Between Critical Thinking and Spiritual Contemplation* (Routledge 2019). Together with Michael Noah Wise, she is co-hosting the *ResponsAbility Podcast*.
- <sup>2</sup> Dipali Chandrakant Mehakarkar is an Assistant Professor at H.G.M. Azam College of Education, Dr. P.A. Inamdar University, Pune. She has 13 years of experience from teacher education and has done a PhD in Education. The title of her PhD thesis is *Developing A Program for Enhancement of Social Maturity Among B.Ed. Teacher Trainees and its Effectiveness*.
- <sup>3</sup> Chaitali Ghosh Sinha, a former Assistant Professor at the Arihant College of Education, Pune, India, where she carried out the project, is Vice-Principal at Priyadarshani School and Junior College. She is pursuing a PhD on an NGO which works for the rehabilitation of children of commercial sex workers.
- <sup>4</sup> In the original Danish: *Den etiske fordring*
- <sup>5</sup> The programme was conducted as two three-day workshops in May and October 2022 at the School of Education, Savitribai Phule Pune University campus, and an online workshop in February 2023. Some of the teacher educators tried out exercises in between and after the workshop, reflecting upon their experiences in the anthology *Developing Teacher Education 2: Reflective Practice Research in Philosophising the Dialogos Way*.
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# CHAPTER 11: REFLECTING ON THE SHIFTING UNDERSTANDINGS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN DIFFERENT EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

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## Abstract

*Inclusive education (IE) has become important for education systems around the world, but what IE entails seems to differ depending on local definitions. This article explores the changing perceptions of IE in Pune, India, as experienced through the lenses of learners from a Finnish university. This is accomplished by analysing narratives that emerged from the mobility programme with the theoretical context, focusing on the experiences that were most impactful on the mobility's participants. Reflective analysis of the narratives shows that theoretical preparation and practical experience are both necessary to conduct genuine intercultural collaboration. Additionally, our analysis suggests that national policies concerning IE can have varied effects on local educational institutions, often relying on the skills and motivation of local actors when it comes to the implementation in their contextual realities. Lastly, we observe that the adaptability of IE is important to fit the needs of specific local environmental needs.*

## Key words:

inclusive education, contextual understandings, higher education mobility, intercultural collaboration, policy implementation

## Introduction and background

We approach this article as a collective. We are the students and main lecturer of the international master's degree programme in Education and Globalisation (Edglo), within the Faculty of Education at the University of

Oulu in Finland. Some of the themes we focus on during our studies include social justice, decoloniality, intercultural competencies and diversity. In 2021, our faculty joined a coalition of projects and partners led by the University of South-Eastern Norway (funded by HK-Dir Norway) and Savitribai Phule Pune University. Our side of the project was in part financed by the Team Finland Knowledge Programme and the Finnish Agency for Education, and as a result, a course called *Teacher Education for Sustainable Futures* (TESF) was designed for educators from Finland, Norway, and India. As a part of the international mobility included in the second iteration of this course, one advisor, six Edglo students, six students from different education programmes of the Faculty of Education in Oulu, and two interns were recruited to be a part of the course and of the mobility on the Finnish part. The mobility included the Finnish and Norwegian delegations spending about a week in Pune, India, in February 2023, and the Indian one visiting Oulu, Finland, for about a week in April 2023. Activities in both contexts included on-campus lectures and activities, and different school and NGO visits.

To position ourselves as the Edglo writing collective, most of us are initially trained as teachers and have evolved as such in our home countries (Bangladesh, Canada, Chile, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Russia, and the United States). Together, we are committed to critically approaching and advancing issues related to global education and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education). With this in mind, we started the academic year together, knowing that we were engaging with this TESF course and mobility, and immediately engaged in research planning. We decided that we would use this course opportunity to conduct our own research, and accordingly, from September 2022 up until the end of the course, we engaged in discussions, (expert meetings, workshops, readings, and diary writings about what we would like to research in this project. As a part of it, we decided to focus on inclusive education as a theme within the TESF course and designed three workshops to be led by Edglo students with all the course participants – one workshop in India and two workshops in Finland.

This article is based on this history and related data collection, and on our own recollections of what happened during the mobility and during the workshops focusing on participants of Finnish and Indian universities. In intercultural workshops, participants from Finland and India discussed different aspects of IE in their respective contexts with each other. The workshops had participants from the Finnish and Indian delegations split into

mixed groups and discuss two passages of articles about inclusive education (IE) – one passage focusing on the Indian context and one on the Finnish context. This article will thereby first contrast different narratives, written by different members of our collective, focusing on the most striking and vivid memories within the project. Next, we will analyse our narratives to establish main themes. We will then problematise how our narratives and related themes are theoretically supported to offer reflections and suggestions concerning international collaboration efforts.

## Narratives

To make the most sense of the three narratives below, some considerations are noteworthy. First, in our Edglo team and long before our short exchange to India, we were all in agreement that *considering context* is fundamental in discussing different concepts and their meaning. This agreement was already present when we all met in our master's degree courses and discussed education in our respective home contexts. Some participants felt that practical considerations were more emphasized than information regarding cultural norms and differences, as intercultural competence is necessary to understand the context of experiences in a culture different from your own. Secondly, in preparation for the trip, we read articles and researched IE with the aim of familiarising ourselves with different definitions of the concept and how it is understood in contexts such as Finland and India. We focused mainly on definitions and how IE was understood and took place in both contexts. However, we did not discuss as much the actors involved in IE, which is an issue that became more apparent and significant throughout the course of our experience.

### *Narrative 1 – The changing meaning of inclusive education*

While engaging with IE literature before our trip, and despite our prior common understanding of the varying *contextual* meanings of different concepts, some of us were surprised to read that IE also has different contextual meanings. The more surprised among us generally shared an understanding of IE that was essentially based on hegemony and agencies, which results from our different intercultural competencies and experiences. Imagining IE to mean simply that all learners have to be included in education together for the best of all, our collective also pictured the need for inclusion of students with various learning, physical, cognitive, socio-emotional, or lin-

guistic needs. With this understanding, it was slightly surprising to engage with literature from the Indian context that emphasized including “caste or street children, but mostly only mentions children with physical/mental disabilities” (Singal, 2005, p. 335). The initial surprise shifted to a broader understanding of what IE can mean at the intellectual level. This new ‘abstract and broader’ understanding of IE concurred, after all, with our cognitive agreement about *context considerations* being fundamental in discussing different concepts.

Our first workshop took place after we had time to walk around the city of Pune and its green and lush campus, after visiting different schools and NGOs, and after having discussions with different educators. Based on this and during discussions with our Indian peers in that workshop, we could hear them echoing what we had read earlier about IE in India, and suddenly a shift happened for some of us. It became all so clear how IE could relate to contextual necessities. When the reality of your school is to deal with a very large number of students with no money or parents, some with visible disabilities, and the related stigma, it becomes apparent that those students are prioritised because they are in high numbers and have noticeably dire needs. Being there in India, having partially witnessed what our Indian colleagues explained, their understanding of IE no longer lived in our cognitive domains only; it had trickled through our affective domains too. What we could only imagine and try to understand before became a part of our newly expanded contextual reality. To hear, see, and feel what the contextual realities actually mean allowed us to align our cognitive and affective domains in knowing about this concept, giving us access to a different understanding of the concept of IE. In all, our exchange unequivocally allowed us to step outside our shared abstract certainty, to face it and make meaning of it in practice, affording us to know differently.

### *Narrative 2: What is visible is hard to overlook*

During our visit to India, we visited a special needs school in Pune, which brought the contextual importance of parents in IE into sharp focus for us. The school is not funded by the government, so its operational costs are higher and dependent on the tuition fees paid by parents. During our time there, we were invited on the roof terrace overlooking Pune, where chairs were lined up under big sunscreens, to attend a presentation about the school’s general functioning, its staff, the situation of the children attending and also about the role of parents. It was then that the principal explained, with what can be perceived as sadness, that one of the challenges

that this inclusive school faces is the reluctance from parents towards inclusive education and the “categorising” of their children. The principal explained that in India, some parents do not feel positively towards inclusive schools, whether they have children with special needs or not. Having their children share learning environments and experiences with children with special needs is not an attractive idea to many parents in that context. In response, the principal explained how they were trying to open the school to pupils who did not need special support so that the ones attending the institution could experience diversity, but this process was not easy. This particular school visit and conversation with the school staff kindled our group awareness about the affective factor involved in inclusive education – it is not necessarily understood as the somewhat positive thing some of us imagined. Or one can support inclusive education in general but not want to have their own children involved in it directly.

The trip to India made us realise that the understanding of inclusive education reflects the needs and experiences of the specific contexts as well. This includes and is influenced by the cultural competencies of the observers. Passing by big classrooms with more than 40 children, some of them sitting on the floor, walking through small classrooms where six children on the autism spectrum were taught, and talking with the teachers of these children, we noticed that the discourse regarding inclusion was notably more related to physical disabilities than emotional or learning disabilities. In other words, we discerned that “visible” diversity was addressed more than “invisible” ones, which is an issue that was also raised in the workshops that took place after the Indian trip, back in Finland, making even clearer for us that there are varied views on inclusivity. These ideas contrast with how we as a team discussed inclusive education in the Finnish context, where issues related to immigration and indigenous peoples have recently been the focus of the conversation around inclusivity (Sinkkonen & Kytälä, 2014). In this sense, we vividly realized that inclusive education could consider visibility as occurring on a spectrum, from the integration of immigrants and indigenous people to aspects such as the integration of differently abled people in response to the needs and characteristics of the specific contexts.

*Narrative 3 – Does inclusive education exist only for those who know what it entails?*

In the workshops, we shared our general impression of inclusivity in Indian educational institutions, but we hesitated to draw conclusions based on our

limited experience. Overall, we tried to be mindful and remember that Pune is a highly urbanised area, meaning we only visited institutions in the ‘concrete jungle’ of Pune, finding our way through the big avenues full of buses, people, autos, animals, and mopeds. As a result, we might have gained an incomplete image of Indian schools, given that the readings we had before the mobility suggested that rural schools deal with more complicated issues. Therefore, we feel it is not productive to draw conclusions based on a restricted scope of experience, as we have to be aware of the limitations of our intercultural knowledge and competencies. In addition, we noticed that participants from India offered divergent views regarding the inclusivity of Indian schools; while some asserted that Indian schools are generally inclusive, others held a contrary opinion. We imagined that the distinction may have originated from personal positivism or scepticism, but in either case, it would be difficult to conclude without further information. With this in mind, we agreed that it is imperative to acknowledge the challenge of evaluating the inclusiveness of India’s educational system, which encompasses a wide range of cultural diversity and a substantial population.

We discussed in different instances how important awareness and recognition of disabilities are for the perception of inclusion. It raises the age-old philosophical dilemma: if no one recognises it, does it still exist? The structures of education appear to be equal to us at first glance; however, this is not always the case due to normalised ableism. We can see that the system we belong to generally influences us, and so unequal practices such as a lack of inclusion become normalised and consequently challenging to identify.

Beyond systematic structures, we also discussed bureaucratic structures and external politics. We could pick up that these structures influence teachers’ autonomy in India and Finland, and their ability to react to classrooms with special needs students. In our group discussions, while some argued that enhancing centralised supervision can ensure inclusivity, other students indicated that inclusivity depends on the ethical behaviour of individual teachers and that, rather than constant monitoring and control, and is necessary to cultivate teachers’ commitment to inclusivity. We were moved by the passion of the Indian teachers to want the best for their students; however, we also felt how hard it can be to see each pupil when you have so many of them in your classroom and do not have the resources to cater to the needs of each child. Therefore, we have observed that differences, such as between public and private education, the number of pupils or the number of teachers in a classroom, can have an effect on how well equipped

teachers are to implement inclusion. Consequently, we feel it is important to investigate whether, in general, Finnish and Indian teachers have the autonomy and support to implement inclusive education in their institutions.

## **Theoretical reflections**

The recurring themes of the narratives shared are the importance of context and visibility when approaching IE. Our existing knowledge and expectations coloured how we experienced the exchange and how we saw and understood situations we faced as people from a Finnish university in India. The narratives showcase this by highlighting the visibility of different aspects of IE – the role of parents when it comes to bridging the gap between the differently abled and the general school population, the importance of teachers' flexibility and the impact of governmental approaches to IE in the different contexts of our countries. All throughout, the importance of intercultural awareness and competencies is strongly felt, with our own preconceptions or a limited understanding limiting how we approached and learned from the events. IE can be approached in differing ways, and its definition depends strongly on the local context as well as the hegemonic interpretation. In the following theoretical reflection, we define IE and discuss its history in India. We also explore concepts such as visibility and context in IE and illustrate the importance of allowing space for reflectivity when discussing IE in intercultural exchange.

IE is certainly a topical phrase and a *must* to be included in all kinds of educational policies and speeches (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007; Peters & Besley, 2014; Thomas & Loxley, 2022). The understanding of the phrase, however, might not be the same for all who speak its name since the concept of inclusion is rooted in diverse disciplines, objectives, and epistemologies (Thomas & Loxley, 2022). Moreover, as acknowledged by Indian educational experts, the concept of IE is rooted in a particular context that is “universally considered as a Euro-American theoretical construct of utopia in academic debates” (Mukherjee, 2017, 38). This European-American focus will be referred to as the Global North. This section will therefore provide a very brief historical overview of the IE concept at the international level (read: Global North) and then how the Indian history of that concept has evolved in parallel. After discussing the different understandings of IE, we will turn to the future of the concept.



### *International (Global North) history of IE*

IE was introduced into international law first with the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* in 1990, then supported with the *UNESCO Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action in Special Needs Education* (UNESCO Salamanca Statement) in 1994 and with the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* in 2006 (Alzahrani, 2020; Peters & Besley, 2014). Since the *UNESCO Salamanca Statement* is considered to be the most influential policy for IE in recent times (Alzahrani, 2020; Ainscow, Slee & Best, 2019; Mukherjee, 2017; Parasuram, 2006; Saloviita, 2020; Thomas & Loxley, 2022), we will focus shortly on this document and its influence.

The *UNESCO Salamanca Statement* outlines that “schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities, and children from other disadvantaged or marginalised areas or groups” (UNESCO, 1994, 6). While this almost 30-year-old definition still conveys the concept of inclusion on a broad level, it is immediately followed by *special education needs*, referring in this framework to people “whose needs arise from disabilities or learning difficulties” (UNESCO, 1994, 6). Acknowledging that this framework was aimed to support action on special needs education, placing an explicit emphasis on disability, and an implicit connection between the concept of IE and the education of differently abled people, exercises a direct influence on the way different nation states interpret the meaning of IE (Mukherjee, 2017). Also influential from this document is the ambiguous way special needs education is to be understood, leading to widespread deficit-oriented understandings and implementations (Ainscow, Slee & Best, 2019; Hodkinson, 2020). The deficit orientation, or the psycho-medical model of (dis)ability, sees differently abled people as in need of a cure, whereas in the social model the society’s actions and beliefs are producing the disability and limitations and therefore should be responsible for removing the limitations, rather than passing the responsibility for implementing inclusion to differently abled individuals (Alzahrani, 2020). The preponderance of the deficit model (including in the UK and in India – see Hodkinson, 2020) renders radical actions to better IE difficult (Ainscow, Slee & Best, 2019). IE should instead convey, in line with the social model of (dis)ability, that “schools and teachers need to adapt and change

their practices to meet the needs of a more diverse school population” (Engelbrecht et al., 2013, 306). However, a vast body of literature about IE suggests that even decades after the *UNESCO Salamanca Statement*, societies from the Global North have not progressed as much as we think (Hodkinson, 2020). At the global level, neoliberal policies and discourses advocate for cost-effectiveness and curriculum standardization, which come in direct contradiction with other global imperatives such as ‘Education for All’. Having to negotiate this contradiction of the global “policyscape” at the nation-state level, individual nation-states craft their own local policies that, at times, carry this disjuncture or simply pick a side (Mukherjee, 2017; Thomas & Loxley, 2022).

### ***Indian nonlinear history of IE***

India gained independence from British rule in 1947, and since then, the central government responsible for education in the country has taken a number of initiatives to respond to inclusion (Parasuram, 2006; Sharma & Das, 2015). While expansive and radical inclusive education models have been proposed by Indian educational philosophers such as Rabindranath Tagore, postcolonial India generally neglected those native models in favour of ones from the Global North, in response to global economic and recognition aspirations (Mukherjee, 2017). Thereby, the current understanding of IE (with a UNESCO definition based on a Euro-American theoretical construct) in India stems from international discourses disregarding the local context (Singal, 2005). Policy borrowing from documents such as the *UNESCO Salamanca Statement*, which places differently abled children as the most excluded in any context, has led to a narrow focus on the meaning of IE and inclusion in India of children with different abilities (Mukherjee, 2017). This international policy interpreted at the local level is outlined by Sharma and Das (2015), reporting from the Ministry of Human Resource Development in 2003: “Inclusive education means all learners ( . . . ) with and without disabilities being able to learn together in ordinary preschool provisions, schools, and community educational settings” (61). Here, it is clear that IE focuses on the inclusion of differently abled children in ordinary Indian schools, but it is unclear whether those children are indeed the most excluded in the Indian context, or if this focus is simply borrowed from a policy that stated so. A careful contextual assessment about which communities are indeed excluded and in need of inclusion in

schools would be needed for a contextually relevant IE (Mukherjee, 2017), in India and elsewhere.

Nevertheless, with a stark Indian focus on IE needed most for differently abled children, Sharma and Das (2015) explain that national educational provisions for those children started with 1974's scheme about *Integrated Education for Disabled Children*. After that, a number of new plans and policies followed until, in 2009, the name of the 1974 policy changed to become *Inclusive Education of the Disabled at the Secondary Stage*, which marked an introduction to the concept of inclusive education. This was followed in 2010 with the act about the *Right to Education*, and this act was instrumental in the shift in what is considered a disability. Despite the acts in place, in 2015, only 1 to 4% of differently abled children had access to some form of education (Sharma & Das, 2015). It is therefore not surprising in this policy-borrowing context to find challenges in the implementation of this global policy at the local level, in any country. Many key challenges have been identified in the way to achieve the IE goals intended by the Indian central government in schools, and Sharma and Das (2015) identified challenges at the macro level such as the understanding of (dis)ability (as individual or societal), the conceptualization of IE (an international concept that has been borrowed in India without enough contextualisation) and teacher education in India as inadequately preparing teachers to engage in such classrooms. Challenges at the micro level include the lack of resources, regular teachers' lack of familiarity with differentiation practices, and lack of supportive leadership, seen with many children denied admission to their neighbourhood schools despite the laws and acts in place. Those challenges are difficult to overcome in classrooms that often exceed 50 students for only one teacher and in a system where grades (and teaching to the test) are fundamental. Teachers might therefore struggle to imagine child-centric education and differentiation and to reimagine a class that prioritises wellbeing and inclusion over grades.

## **Context and visibility of disabilities in Indian education and educational context**

One of the main themes we found when investigating the narratives was the visibility and context of disabilities. The context of our visit to India was limited to a small sample size of three different schools in the district of Pune in Maharashtra state. Any knowledge and insights gained

are not necessarily applicable to other areas in India or even other schools within the district of Pune. Nevertheless, studies reveal that some overarching trends regarding invisible disabilities in Indian societies and education can be observed (Ahmad, 2015; Fernandes, 2022; Srivastava, 2019). Particularly in India, invisible disabilities in conventional classrooms are often not addressed due to a lack of awareness and support in schools (Srivastava, 2019). Such a shortcoming in consciousness hinders access to resources like assessments or support and affects policy planning (Ahmad, 2015; Shah & Trivedi, 2017). In comparison, the Finnish educational system is more homogenous and universal, and it is a priority of the Finnish government to provide more quality resources to teachers and students (The Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, n.d.).

The promotion of inclusion in educational settings is often contingent upon the roles of stakeholders and contextual factors. This can affect, for example, teacher education towards the availability of official and private resources and understanding of the individual students whose needs are not directly visible (Fernandes, 2022). Furthermore, Johansson (2014) identified that teachers often consider the school's responsibility towards students with autism as limited to the transference of academic knowledge as opposed to including social development. This could contribute to social exclusion when children with invisible special needs are not able to follow the general curriculum or fulfil social developmental objectives. Fernandes (2022) connects this to the focus of special needs education in India, aiming at the reproduction of normativity instead of providing adaptations and flexibility to address the actual skills, needs, and capabilities of the students. Moreover, Srivastava (2019) suggests that a lack of teacher preparation may partially explain why teachers neglect students with special education needs in the classroom, contributing to academic failure and the non-fulfilment of societal expectations. This may not thoroughly explain every individual case, but it does necessitate a focus on teacher education.

Children can be excluded, othered, and become marginalised or disregarded by society when they are not able to meet society's expectations of normativity in the respective educational system (Hughes, 2009). Singal (2019) illustrates that children's perspectives are lost when they are excluded, whether on a smaller scale in families or on a larger scale in communities. Children are often not able to reclaim visibility after exclusion, which can lead to further problems in society outside of education when they grow older (Ahmad, 2015; O'Grady et al., 2010; Pandit, 2010). Considering the established long-term effects of educational exclusion and the

connected societal exclusion of students with invisible special needs, different researchers have focused on the development of possible local and regional solutions. Shah and Trivedi (2017) provide multiple suggestions in their article on how the local situation in the state of Maharashtra can be improved, including increasing awareness about specific learning disabilities. Kumari et al. (2019) also address this when rethinking teacher education in India. They differentiate in a two-sided “narrow” and “broad” approach, focusing on the promotion of inclusion of specific special needs education students as well as a change of mindset regarding diversity in the student bodies and school contexts, which could also affect the surrounding community.

Globally, the exclusion of special needs education students from general education classes can often be seen in countries with decentralised education systems as well as urban and densely populated areas (Pulkkinen et al., 2020). Learning from an African context, Mphahlele (2020) recognises the necessity of promoting locally driven inclusive education when planning and implementing change or interventions. This approach is expected to significantly contribute to a sustainable support model that will advance inclusive education practices and could be implemented in other countries and contexts as well.

## **Reflectivity in intercultural experiences**

When engaging in intercultural experiences, it is crucial that before, during, and after, the participants are aware of their preset cultural, social, and geographical conditions. This section will question the view on international mobility as a neutral and knowledge-driven phenomenon (Morley et al., 2018), aiming to raise the question of *what kind of whose* knowledge is circulating in these mobilities. In this sense, our exchange had the goal to expand our knowledge on IE through collaboration between students from the Global North and the Global South, recognising that there might be multiple forms of knowledge and valuing this diversity, as well as the ambiguity it could precipitate.

Nevertheless, for this to happen, first we needed to deepen our cultural awareness (Bennett and Bennett, 2004). This included recognizing and reflecting on our own positionality as a Western academic group in a “modern”/colonial setting (Vásquez, 2015), by starting a process of humbling and unlearning relations to power and recognizing our knowledge as par-

tial. Kirpitchenko (2015) and Jokikokko (2009) make it clear that this is possible through self-reflection. Reflecting can help us to see our own and others' views as simply different but of equal value. Even though we had read about IE and had experiences related to the concept, the international encounter made us realise our understanding was incomplete and could be broadened. For this to happen, we needed to reflect on and be aware of the societal hierarchies in place. We had to adopt not only an openness to diversity but also the curiosity to engage with it so that we could be actively involved in the recognition and construction of shared knowledge.

Zuchowski et al. (2017) suggest that collaborative work between the Global North and the Global South might be perpetuating neocolonialism due to unequal funding and unequal knowledge production between universities from the Global North and the Global South. To deal with these hierarchies between universities, international encounters must aim at creating meaningful reciprocity through dialogue, relationship building, and power sharing to support genuine collaborative work. This is in line with Vásquez's (2015) idea on how global divides can be challenged through intercultural dialogue.

## Meta-reflection

In line with reflective practice research (Mortari, 2015), we considered it fundamental to reflect not only on the practical aspects of our research work but also on the mental and emotional experiences that contributed to our broader understanding of IE and its practical meaning. Those mental and emotional experiences are central to this article, as can be seen in the narratives opening the text and the findings presented below. The findings arose from several iterative group discussions, first, about the experiences that spoke most powerfully to us as a group, which led us to establish key themes and to build related narratives together, such as IE. Second, the key themes were expounded in the theoretical section, and we then reflected on how those are connected to the themes of the narratives. While doing this mapping work, central findings emerged, such as the necessity of both theory and practice to facilitate genuine intercultural collaboration. Then, varying interpretations of national policies regarding IE can have counter-productive impacts when implemented in local educational settings. Additionally, we observed the importance of local actors in the implementation of IE and the potential of IE to change in order to fit the specific local envi-

ronmental needs. This section will therefore expand on how our three main findings emerged, entwining narratives and theory.

As mentioned in the introduction, our group did a great deal of preparation work before the mobility part of the project, and we can claim as a group to have a relatively developed intercultural mindset (Bennett & Bennett, 2004). Despite this, the barriers to true intercultural exchange were higher than we had anticipated: the preparatory readings, as mentioned in Narrative 1, were not on their own sufficient to facilitate genuine collaboration. However, as shown in Narrative 2, we learned that although abstract understanding is an important part of intercultural competence, it is also a skill that requires practice in real-life situations (Bennett & Bennett, 2004) as well as consistent reflection to develop (Kirpitchenko, 2015; Jokikokko, 2009). Spaces that allow personal or non-formal discussions provide opportunities for relationship building, as illustrated in Narrative 3. This encourages reflection during and outside of the workshops, challenging the knowledge hegemony and global hierarchies to become obscure or even completely disappear (Zuchowski et al., 2017).

At the policy level, the influential *UNESCO Salamanca statement* was compounded with special needs education, placing explicit disability emphasis with IE (Mukherjee, 2017). This limited outlook on disability, along with the policy manoeuvring, exacerbated the deficit orientation of disability (Ainscow, Slee & Best, 2019; Hodkinson, 2020). This could be partly seen in Narrative 1, where our Indian colleagues in the workshop agreed with the literature, which presented that IE in India was mainly about dealing with differently abled individuals. Even if the policies were to be changed at the international and national levels, the contextual and structural understanding that different practical actors have developed might be difficult to shift. This became apparent in practice when visiting the school discussed in Narrative 2. The policy aiming to include differently abled students does not resonate with parts of society, leading to differently abled students. This led to them being marked as “other” instead of a normal part of the school population. The reluctance of parents towards IE and the labelling of their children as attending an inclusive school mirrors the deficit orientation in IE policy planning and implementation (Ainscow, Slee & Best, 2019; Hodkinson, 2020), which leads to social consequences. The negative connotation of the term “inclusive” steered parents towards not wanting their neurotypical children to be associated with the school, fearing othering by society or a lack of quality of the education. While this became apparent to us in connection with the school in Pune, mentioned

in Narrative 2, we realise that negative connotations of IE are not an Indian but a global issue (Hodkinson, 2020) that must be addressed worldwide, but in local contexts. The pervasive deficit-orientation model of disabilities focuses on the negative associations connected with the normalised ableism we discussed in Narrative 3, instead of anchoring policy planning or implementation on the flexibility to support all students to embrace their full potential. On a classroom level, the deficit-orientation model of disabilities can prevent the successful implementation of policies (Fernandes, 2022; Srivastava, 2019), while many students do not even have access to IE despite supportive governmental strategies (Sharma & Das, 2015). Shifting policy amidst global incentives that are neoliberal and speak of education in terms of *efficiency* and *effectiveness* (Biesta, 2020; Thomas & Loxley, 2022), it is difficult to focus on contextual singularities, being under international/policy pressure. This is why we place much importance on contexts and challenge ourselves and others to reflect on policies locally and how they can best serve all students. With better examination of the aims we have for education at the local level, we can better define what we need for better inclusive education at the same level.

As individuals focusing on inclusive education, some of our first impulses were to evaluate what we saw in Indian schools through our Global North lens, despite our efforts to transcend it. However, in our reflection, our limited understanding and limited view discussed in Narrative 3 became apparent (Kirpitchenko, 2015; Jokikokko, 2009). This emphasised to us that educators and other actors are better positioned to determine what works in their own context and in the best interest of their students. Actors should be given the autonomy to create and implement models of inclusive education that best fit their students. Classrooms in which the surrounding structure already allows for a more flexible approach have supported this claim, as we touched upon in Narrative 3. The more adaptable that IE models become, the greater the opportunity for them to appeal to a wide variety of stakeholders in the relevant contextual realities. This also allows for adequate support regarding the specific visible or invisible needs of all students (Fernandes, 2022; Johansson, 2014) and challenges the widespread deficit orientation of disability (Ainscow, Slee & Best, 2019; Hodkinson, 2020).

Both our research and our experience show that many different definitions of IE exist (Alzahrani, 2020; Namanyane & Shaoan, 2021). As shown in Narrative 3, varied views can even exist in a single classroom. Our main conclusion is that there is no need to choose one specific definition of IE to prioritise above others. If IE is indeed a concept rooted in Global North



theories, perhaps it is time to re-evaluate that the needs for inclusion are defined by specific contexts instead of merely borrowing hegemonic definitions and policies, which will inevitably be met with multiple incongruities when implemented in different contexts. This could minimise the resources allocated to research done about why IE from the *UNESCO Salamanca Statement* is met (often in the Global South) with a plethora of challenges at the micro and macro levels (Fernandez, 2022; Sharma & Das, 2015). Inclusivity can take on different forms depending on the context of the school system, which can include factors such as geographic location, socioeconomic status, educational training and experience, or social and cultural traditions and beliefs (Namanyane & Shaoan, 2021). For example, our experience in India showed us the impact parents can have on the implementation of IE. Finally, in line with Artiles and Kozleski (2007), we imagine that it is important to shift the general IE understanding from one of offering access and participation in general education mainly to differently abled people to one of including all marginalized people. It is crucial to also include those whose needs are not immediately visible. Based on this, we wish to conclude this piece with a question to the readers that may spark avenues of interest for future research: How could IE be formulated/understood to enable all actors to support the learning of all students within their contextual realities?

## Notes

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## CHAPTER 12. A HORSE CALLED HITLER: REFLECTIONS ON THE GERMAN GUILT

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### Abstract

*This article explores the complexities of international academic encounters, challenged and challenging national identities, and the weight of historical collective guilt and responsibility through the author's personal experience at an international conference. As a German academic working in Norway, the author reflects on a controversial performance in which she portrayed a horse named Hitler, ridden by a colleague impersonating Mussolini. This episode serves as a starting point for a reflective research practice, highlighting the persistence of World War II in memory cultures and the struggle to navigate collective guilt. Drawing on theories of collective guilt, historical responsibility, post-generational trauma, and otherness, the article engages with typologies of guilt and attitudes toward historical responsibility, as formulated by Karl Jaspers and more recent scholars. It further examines the concept of historical responsibility through the works of Hannah Arendt, Iris Marion Young, and Michael Rothberg before concluding with a discussion of alterity. Ultimately, the chapter advocates for a nuanced, dialogical approach to historical memory, emphasizing awareness, critical reflection, and ethical engagement in transnational academic communities.*

### Key words

*Historical guilt, German guilt, collective guilt, collective memory, trans-generational trauma, Karl Jaspers, practice research, internationalization*

### Introduction and background

International encounters are not always easy. Personal and national histories intersect in academic spaces, shaping interactions in complex ways. My case highlights both the challenges and opportunities that internation-

alization presents – how it can disrupt national academic traditions and surface difficult shared histories, but also foster dialogue and new perspectives. Reflecting together in international teams, contributing to this anthology, and sharing insights from our diverse experiences have helped me gain greater clarity. By combining personal narrative with theoretical analysis, this chapter contributes to ongoing (theoretical) discussions about historical guilt and responsibility.

The setting for my experience is a Nordic academic women's history conference. At this time, I was a PhD student employed at a Norwegian university. I participated at the conference with a scientific paper on the history of an international organization. The academic content was organized into thematic sessions, independent of national contexts. The social part of the conference, however, was organized around nationalities: Every Nordic nation should contribute something to the conference's evening programme: a song, a performance, or a sketch. So, from our cross-national all-day thematic groupings, the members living and working in Norway grouped to agree on a common Norwegian social contribution. It was a bit open as to whether we should provide something typical for Norway or related to the conference topic, or just anything entertaining. I took part in the Norwegian group. My work affiliation was Norwegian; my topic was Nordic. However, my citizenship and heritage were German. I was the only one in the Norwegian group without ethnic Norwegian heritage. My status as German and my inherited German history and culture came into focus during group discussions and our contribution to the evening programme, where I was on stage as a horse called Hitler. My case shows obstacles of internationalization, national stereotypes, and shared difficult histories. In this chapter, I discuss how I dealt with this process and, in retrospect, reflect on different struggling identities that were at stake, performed, enforced, and actualized in this international setting and encounter. The reflective research practice proved to be a valuable tool for analysing and comprehending my past emotions and reactions, guiding a way to act and interact in the present and future. I will draw on theories of collective guilt, historical responsibility, and otherness. Hopefully, my case will provide readers with insights into some pitfalls of internationalization and outline ways to overcome these difficulties.

My method is the three-stage framework suggested by Lindseth (2020) and Hansen, Helskog, and Weiss (2022). I will start with describing a specific experience (1), which is an experience of crisis, discrepancy, or something unexpected. I will find words for an experience that made an im-

pression; it was disturbing and difficult to forget (Lindseth, 2017). Putting the experienced event/happening into a narrative makes it possible to analyse and to critically reflect upon. It is a process of retrospective meaning-making about what the narrated experience is about and what is at stake (2), and finally, I will discuss my critical reflection with the help of relevant theory (3). This theoretical discussion will shed new light on my experience, opening up new possibilities for understanding my situation and acting upon it. I hope it will also offer valuable insights to academic colleagues navigating similarly complex (post-)war international encounters.

### **My specific experience:**

In the following paragraph, I will narrate my specific experience. It is a story about what the Norwegian group decided to perform. This is what I remember:

*After a long conference day, discussing transnational history and the role of international organizations, the participants gather in national groups. Everybody is tired. What should we perform? A song, maybe. Like last time. Or a sketch? There is a serious lack of enthusiasm. Somehow, the focus turns to me. Another PhD scholar identifies me as German. An idea springs up in her mind: you play Hitler, and he is a horse. I will be Mussolini riding on you. So, I am acting as a horse named Hitler, with another woman riding on my back, impersonating Mussolini. We are galloping into the conference room with more than a hundred delegates seated in it. We climb on the stage: me, the Hitler horse, and the Mussolini rider. A German female PhD student and a Norwegian PhD student riding on her back. We narrate a story about Hitler and Mussolini. A fantasy around historical events. I do not remember what we were narrating or what the others thought or did. Afterwards, another German, living and working in Sweden, who was part of the Swedish group, asked me: What was this? She was startled. Could not believe what she just saw. She was the only one addressing me afterwards. I did not have an answer.*

For me, it was one of my most absurd and bizarre experiences inside the academic world so far. It was funny, grotesque, and somehow humiliating at the same time. I am still in wonderment about how this happened. That we did this. Why did we do it? How did we end up with this strange performance about me being a horse called Hitler and Mussolini riding on my back? Initially, I liked the idea of contributing to the social programme as



part of the Norwegian group. It felt good to be part of a collective. It created a sense of belonging. A collective spirit, which I had not often experienced during my socialization as a German citizen growing up in Germany. To perform as a national collective, as “Germans” at an international academic conference, would be rather unlikely to happen. Socialized in the spirit of post-World War II education, nationality was not a category that felt natural or aspiring, not even meaningful to me. For me, academia was – and still is – a world that transcends national and cultural boundaries. I wanted to be a part of an academic community beyond the nation-state. Identifying as European, international, or cosmopolitan was a common form of collective identity construction in the German Federal Republic (Welch & Wittlinger, 2021). My epistemological stance is social constructivism. My academic interest is to trace the making of changing categories, norms, and boundaries: gender, nationality, and scientific disciplines. It is all about questioning essence and ahistorical stability. To identify as an academic cosmopolitan was in alignment with this. Cosmopolitanism is “a term that throughout its long philosophical, aesthetic, and political history has been used to denote cultivated detachment from restrictive forms of identity” (Anderson, 2006, p. 70). My academic contribution to the conference was about a women’s international medical organization that was built in the aftermath of World War I. Medical women from all over the world came together at international conferences to share knowledge about women’s health and living conditions. They aspired to build a collective supra-national knowledge base to better the living conditions for all women. In the spirit of the Inter-war Years internationalization, the goal was to overcome times of war and to build a peaceful future together (although the organization was clearly dominated by some Western nations such as the USA, Great Britain, and France. Illusions/Delusions were present in my case as well. So, how did this performance happen? How did it come to life? In brainstorming, group dynamics unexpectedly turned my German background into a focal point – something to be addressed, if not problematised. Here I was, thinking that I could pass as one of them, but I could not. My Germanness led immediately to Hitler, National Socialism, World War II, the Holocaust, and inevitable collective guilt. Being a German, no matter where I might go and whoever I wanted to be. How could I be so naïve? My otherness was pointed out, my non-inclusiveness in the group of naturalized Norwegians. Nobody protested. Not even myself. I do not know why. Why did we perform a story about two fascists, and why did I agree to play the worst person and

the most difficult German history I can think about? What are the possible emotions and meanings, that time and today?

## What is at stake?

What was this? It was absurd, incorrect, funny, devastating, and very serious at the same time. I will suggest some readings:

*It was a children's play.* An adult playing the horse, and a child riding on her back. Making a joke about Hitler and Mussolini. Making a joke about a German? Politically incorrect, a slightly shocking happening, bringing fascists to the evening programme. In the disguise of play. The revealing and disarming use of humour, satire. Performing a taboo in the guise of play.

*It was a historian's fascination* with difficult and traumatic history. The ongoing fascination with war and monstrosity.

*It was a difficult personal history.* Maybe the Mussolini-playing PhD student's relatives were arrested, tortured, or even killed by a German soldier during the German occupation of Norway. Maybe this was not fun at all. It might have been a carnivalesque re-enactment of a difficult (personal) history. For me, it was personal history. My grandparents were soldiers during World War II. They killed people; they were occupying other countries.

*It was an honest and, in retrospect, revealing act* – making explicit the hidden prejudices and silenced resentments about meeting and interacting with Germans in the present. Being confronted with one of them as a colleague, and even more so, accepting them – me – as one of them/us. I was confronted with my grandparents' past, and, at the same time, I was an academic occupier myself, an intruder in the academic national labor market, in the Norwegian and Nordic collective academic identity. It was the reaction to a changing Norwegian academic world. My presence in the group challenged the traditions of Nordic conferences, comprised of natural citizens of the Nordic countries, born and raised there. I represented a historical change: the internationalization of Norwegian academia. Threatening traditions. Threatening careers, threatening research traditions, threatening communities. Threatened by German migrant academics.

Who are we representing in international contexts and encounters: our individual academic background (so, you are a historian! so, you are a sociologist!)? Our current research topic? Our cultural backgrounds? Are we acting as and are we regarded as cultural, national ambassadors? In this

setting, at that time, I was reduced to my Germanness. From today's perspective, from my secure position as a faculty member of a Norwegian university, I can look back at the event differently, more ambiguously. This was not only something negative happening to me that I silenced for more than a decade. I even forgot about it before the topic of this anthology inspired me to dig into my international experiences. Today, I can see myself as active and strong as well. Firstly, strong in a literal sense: I was able to carry another woman on my back, even running, galloping like a horse. Like a parent, carrying a child. Today, I can even understand the event as a liberating provocation. Making the unspoken explicit. Via a carnivalesque performance. You are a German; we know it, you know it; let's face it. World War II, the German occupation of Norway, is a living memory, a national and personal heritage, and history that still matters a lot in Norway. At least we openly displayed what is going on: addressing and accepting or refusing collective shame and guilt.

One way to retrospectively make sense of my story is that I accepted my historical collective guilt as a German. I acted upon my feeling of responsibility for the German past that I had learned about in school since grade one. Lived experiences are another answer to the question, "Why did you not refuse to play the Hitler horse?" I was simply used to it. It did not come as a surprise. I had been called a Nazi before, in several countries. I have experienced some outspoken accusations, some more subtle in the disguise of jokes and supposedly funny remarks. I accepted playing a horse called Hitler in the past. I accepted and silenced the episode. Do I have a real choice to say, I am not responsible for the deeds of my grandparents, and I do not want to be identified and essentialised as a German?

In the following sections, I will focus on the topic of guilt. I will discuss different theoretical approaches to the question of German guilt, the concept of collective guilt, historical responsibility and otherness. In the resuming discussion, I will critically discuss my academic starting point, the concept of cosmopolitical identities, and the challenges of deconstructing and de-essentialising narratives of national historical identities.

## **The question of collective guilt**

In 1947, shortly after World War II, while the Nuremberg trials were going on, German philosopher Karl Jaspers wrote about distinct ways Germans dealt with guilt and responsibility for the NS crimes II (Jaspers, 1965).

German reactions and attitudes towards World War II and the Holocaust – the acceptance of guilt and responsibility – is a research topic until today. Do the younger generations think and act differently from their grand- and great-grandparents? Or are they the true grandchildren of their grandparents, inheriting a culture, a way of thinking and acting, and a totalitarian mindset? In 2000, Dan Diner wrote that the question of German guilt had become a “moral imperative” after World War II and something that lives on for generations.

*What subcutaneous currents within the consciousness of the Germans vis-à-vis Nazism and the murder of the Jews produce such enduring consequences, repeated anew in a decade's cycle? Many of the reactions point to profound layers of feeling that stir the Germans again and again to different degrees of intensity.* (Diner, 2000, p. 219)

Diner and others describe these guilt feelings as both collective memory and collective consciousness. The history of World War II and the Holocaust and the questions of guilt and the imperative of responsibility are of importance for the national self-understanding of the German state, people of German heritage, and people living in Germany today (Diner, 2000, p. 219). Karl Jaspers denied that something like a collective consciousness exists. Jaspers stressed individual choices and actions. People might have similar ways of thinking and acting because they communicate with each other; they share thoughts:

*The self-analysis of a people in historical reflection and the personal self-analysis of the individual are two different things. But the first can happen only by the way of the second. What individuals accomplish jointly in communication may, if true, become the spreading consciousness of many and then is called national consciousness. Again, we must reject collective thinking as fictitious thinking. Any real metamorphosis occurs through individuals, in the individual, in many individuals, independent of or mutually inspiring one another.* (Jaspers, 1965, p. 96)

So, does cross-generational, predetermined collective German guilt make sense? Questions of individual and collective historical guilt have been discussed and re-elaborated by, among others, philosophers Hannah Arendt (2003) and Iris Marion Young (2011), and, more recently, in connection with decolonial theorists, for example, by Rothberg, who introduced the concept of the “implicated subject” (Rothberg, 2019). Collective cultural heritage and its meanings and responsibilities are discussed by Aleida Assmann (2016) and others. I will start to present some selected research

## Karl Jaspers on “The Question of German Guilt”

Psychiatrist and philosopher Karl Jaspers held a lecture on German guilt in 1946. A revised version was published as a book called *The Question of German Guilt* (translation from German *Die Schuldfrage*) in 1965 (Jaspers, 1965). In this book, Jaspers described typical attitudes towards the atrocities of the Holocaust and World War II. According to Jaspers, directly after the war, everybody who was still alive was guilty.

*The only common denominator may be our nationality which makes all jointly guilty and liable for having let 1933 come to pass without dying. This also unites the outer and inner emigration.* (Jaspers, 1965, p. 98)

Jaspers distinguished different kinds of guilt. Firstly, juridical guilt, which applied to those who committed crimes against the law and could be judged by a court. Secondly, political guilt: Every citizen was – and always is – responsible for the actions and policies of their government, whether they have voted for it or not. If you choose to stay in a country and benefit from it, and you do not engage in resistance, you bear responsibility. People are obliged to prevent the state, its head, and politicians from committing crimes. “Ever since European nations have tried and beheaded their monarchs; the task of the people has been to keep their leaders in check. The acts of states are also the acts of persons.” (Jaspers, 1965, p. 49)

Thirdly, moral guilt is more encompassing. Every person must ask themselves individually of their own conscience and take responsibility for their choices and actions: Did I act rightly and well? To say one was only following orders, or to state that one did not have a choice, is not a valuable excuse. If an action felt wrong, or if a person knew that he/she should act differently but did not do so, he/she is morally guilty (Jaspers, 1965, pp. 24–26, 45–67; see in addition Lang, 2006, p. 113). Fourthly, there is metaphysical guilt – the guilt of being still alive while others died fighting and resisting.

*Thousands in Germany sought, or at least found death in battling the regime, most of them anonymously. We survivors did not seek it. We did not go into the streets when our Jewish friends were led away; we did not scream until we too were destroyed. We preferred to stay alive, on the feeble, if logical, ground that our death could not have helped anyone. We are guilty of being alive.* (Jaspers, 1965, p. 66)

Few Germans were legally guilty, and none of the ones born after the war could be legally or politically guilty. It is the sense of being morally

and metaphysically guilty that lives on over generations until today. As Dan Diner puts it, there exists a cross-generational guilt feeling:

*It is precisely this sense of guilt without culpability of a legal nature that has produced the cross-generational convulsions accompanying public discourse on Nazism and German mass crimes. These guilt feelings, evoked without individual involvement and even displaced temporally, point back to the specificity of the deed branded into the locus "Auschwitz". (Diner, 2000, p. 220)*

Jaspers presented both a typology of guilt and a typology of typical reactions and attitudes towards the atrocities of World War II. Jaspers is clear that accepting guilt is not an easy task. We are quick to accuse and blame others, but we do not want others to accuse us. We do not want to feel guilty.

*Our human disposition – in Europe, at least – is such as to make us equally sensitive to blame and quick to blame others. We do not want our toes stepped on, but in our moral judgment of others we get excited easily. This is the consequence of moralistic poisoning. There is generally nothing to which we are so sensitive as to any hint that we are considered guilty. Even if we are guilty, we do not want to let ourselves be told. (Jaspers, 1965, p. 101)*

With this very uncomfortable starting point of being accused, which typical reactions and attitudes does Jasper discern from his fellow German citizens?

Jasper presents several explanations and relativisation strategies to refuse guilt: "The others did and do wrong as well." Or: "What choices did we have living in a terrorist dictatorship?" Another defence strategy was to mention one's own losses and sufferings that weigh up for the guilt: "I/we have suffered too." This suffering is regarded as a redemption already paid. "How long should we be punished?" Yet another attitude to deal with the accusations of guilt – and a strategy to live with it – is self-abasement and defiance. People embrace guilt and sometimes have an urge to confess and thereby "to enhance his worth by his confession, to eclipse others. His confession of guilt wants to force others to confess. There is a touch of aggressiveness in such confessions." (Jaspers, 1965, p. 101) Jasper links confessing guilt to pride and self-respect. People might say to themselves, "At least we admit it", and this admittance makes us better than others, who do not confess their flaws and wrongdoings (and everybody does wrong) (Jaspers, 1965, p. 102). All these reactions and attitudes are understandable.

But according to Jaspers, none of it is an appropriate reaction: I will come

back to Jasper's question of what an acceptable reaction might look like at the end of my article. First, I will examine more contemporary approaches to the question of historical guilt in the wake of Jasper's research.

## Recent typologies of German attitudes towards World War II

Katalin Morgan (2017) presents a typology of German student reactions towards the Holocaust in the journal *Holocaust Studies*. In her research, Morgan observed classroom discussions and conducted focus group interviews with students who had been taught about the Holocaust with witness stories of Holocaust survivors. The aim of her study was to find out whether "cultural patterns and mental habits today are perpetuated in members of the next generation and those who teach them about this topic" (Morgan, 2017, p. 457).

Morgan's research aimed at finding whether young Germans today still show similar thinking habits to their Nazi grand- and great-grandparents. The researcher found the patterns she was looking for. Whether they were inherited or communicated, the article does not say, but the author presents consistent "patterns" that she termed as "perverse". Morgan found that "*at least four such thinking patterns could be identified and that some of them could be termed perverse*" (Morgan, 2017, p. 443).

The article defines "perverse" as a deviation from truthfulness (Morgan, 2017, p. 443). One of these perverse thinking patterns was when students and teachers described World War II and the Holocaust as "senseless" and difficult to understand. Especially when students and teachers did not make a further effort to explain. Students and teachers did not discuss how one could actively deal with the past. The second perverse thought pattern Morgan identified was relativising. Students and teachers compared the Holocaust to other historical events, like today's discrimination against immigrants. A third strategy was externalization, which means that respondents thought that the Holocaust was conducted by extreme right-wing people and not ordinary, everyday Germans. In this way, only a few were guilty. Fourthly, students refused to accept responsibility and guilt when confronted with a witness who was not willing to forgive. "The sense of feeling personally attacked when a survivor expresses a prejudice against Germans in general" (Morgan, 2017, p. 457). Some students went into defensive mode. All these attitudes were wrong. But what could be the right attitude?

Morgan highlights some problems related to the guilt question, such as the stigmatizations young Germans still face in international encounters: “The question of guilt, shame, responsibility, and stigmatization as ‘Nazis’ that German young people continue to experience remains a topic not to be silenced” (Morgan, 2017, p. 457). The author does not offer a solution to this complicated question. Her answer is awareness when teaching about the Holocaust in schools, both in Germany and other countries. Nevertheless, my reading of the article is that the grand- and great-grandchildren still must accept guilt and responsibility for the actions of their dead relatives. My interpretation of this article is that if grandchildren and great-grandchildren want to free themselves from their heritage, or rather, if they do not want to be suspected of having the same inherited cultural thinking and, potentially, acting patterns, they must fully accept responsibility and guilt. They/we/I must accept the singularity of the event. There is no room for relativising, arguing. It is not really an option to just say that it happened a long time ago, to reject responsibility. These are still not accepted answers to give.

In 1922, in the same journal, *Holocaust Studies*, Anke Fiedler addresses a similar question in an article titled “To Remember or Not to Remember – The Germans, National Socialism, and the Holocaust.” According to Fiedler, “people are bearers of their country’s legacy – irrespective of how they feel about it” (Fiedler, 2022, p. 2).

Fiedler interviewed 265 Germans and identified ideal types of dealing with World War II and the Holocaust. The author connects specific ways of responding to historical guilt to political preferences, class, educational backgrounds, and geography – East Germany and West Germany. Fiedler identifies a political left-wing ideal type who believes that Germany does not do enough to redeem itself for its past and wholly stands for shame and guilt. The opposite type are the ones refusing guilt, wishing an end to remembrance and guilt. This position is closely aligned with right-wing policies; for example, the far-right-wing party AfD (Alternative für Deutschland), which is not an accepted ally to any other political party in Germany so far, because of its stance on past and current immigration policies. To deny the past, to even suggest that something was good in the NS period, or to claim that the past lies behind us still is a deviant position in German politics (Fiedler, 2022, p. 4).

For a young academic milieu, Fiedler identifies the ideal type of the “universalists”. According to Fiedler, this is an academic milieu that aims for post-nationalism. Academics, used to travelling and working in interna-



tional contexts, who identify with a culturally diverse Europe, rather than with Germany as a nation-state and cultural unit. According to Fiedler, this type is characterized by pride about the way Germany has dealt with the past, or as she puts it, they “generate new national self-esteem from the (alleged) German learning success of its National Socialist past” (Fiedler, 2022, p. 14). Not only does this narrative generate a positive self-image, but it even leads to thinking that Germans have a special responsibility and role in the world. Having learned to deal successfully with the past, Germans have a responsibility to teach other nations how to overcome nationalism. The motto is: What happened here must not be repeated elsewhere (Fiedler, 2022, p. 14).

Reading this, I feel exposed. Fiedler tells the narrative of me and a lot of my academic colleagues and friends. Probably, I would say something similar. I have been dealing with the past since first grade. I have been confronted with guilt and stigmas and am educated to speak up and to enter critical dialogue. I/my generation must have learned something that others did not. Everywhere we see a naïve (unenlightened) attitude towards nationality that we must question. In this way, accepting German responsibility opens for agency and a positive identity. Reading about the ideal type of the Universalist, I feel exposed and a bit ashamed about this cheap way out of the guilt question.

Confessing guilt, accepting guilt, and deriving pride from guilt are interesting continuations from Jaspers’ ideal types until research findings today. Shame, guilt, and pride are interlinked. Raudsepp and Zadora describe this as a paradox. They describe the German attitude towards the past as both collective shame and a “widely shared belief in Germany’s extraordinary accomplishments in the arena of memory politics” (Raudsepp & Zadora, 2019, p. 92).

So far, we have established that collective guilt for the past is still an issue in research literature. Different researchers have identified typical attitudes and responses to guilt – none of them seemed to be convincing. In the following, I will have a close look at the concepts of responsibility for the past and how to possibly act on it in the present.

## **From guilt to responsibility**

Hannah Arendt is another philosopher who took up the questions of German guilt. Arendt distinguishes between guilt and responsibility. Guilt can

only apply to individuals and is a juridical term only. According to Arendt, feeling guilt is not a valuable emotion if one has not participated in wrong actions. One is not guilty of the sins of one's father. However, one bears responsibility.

*There is such a thing as responsibility for things one has not done; one can be held liable for them. But there is no such thing as being or feeling guilty for things that happened without oneself actively participating in them.* (Arendt, 2003, p. 147)

What is the difference between guilt and responsibility? Like Jaspers, Arendt did not value sentimental guilt confessions highly. Guilt confessions do not lead to political actions (Arendt, 2003, pp. 29, 148). For Arendt, the individual is the starting point for analysis, but it is important to acknowledge that people must act together for political change.

*This vicarious responsibility for things we have not done, this taking upon ourselves the consequences for things we are entirely innocent of, is the price we pay for the fact that we live our lives not by ourselves but among our fellow men, and that the faculty of action, which, after all, is the political faculty par excellence, can be actualized only in one of the many and manifold forms of human community.* (Arendt, 2003, pp. 157–158)

Arendt, and in her wake, Iris Marion Young and others like Michael Rothberg, are interested in political actions that lead to change for the present and future. Iris Marion Young stresses that one is responsible for actions in the past if one is benefiting from prior wrongdoings, leading to perpetuated structural injustices. Her example is racial injustice in the US, which is a consequence of slavery (Young, 2011, referred to in Rothberg, 2019, p. 50). Responsibility is understood as political responsibility that must lead to political actions. Michael Rothberg argues in similar ways. His case is colonialisation, and he proposes a new term, which is the implicated subject. Rothberg stresses the importance of taking responsibility for the actions of one's ancestors, even though one is not guilty, and one cannot do anything to undo the wrongdoings of the ancestors. The descendants bear a responsibility to the present and future. The answer to historical guilt – to be an implicated subject – is to act together with others for the benefit of many others (Rothberg, 2019, p. 201).

Arendt, Rothberg, and Young obviously have a point – in a juridical sense, the grandchildren do not have guilt and cannot feel guilt. But still, they feel affected emotionally and bear responsibility in the present. The generation of the grandchildren, me included, has been taught about the atrocities of their grandfathers; we have undergone re-education to prevent

us from committing the same atrocities. As such, my generation is taught with the scary possibility that we as well might be capable of repeating the crimes. As I have depicted earlier, one strategy of dealing with this knowledge is denial, another self-hatred. Aleida Assmann ascribes to the younger German generations a perpetrator trauma as a cross-generational collective identity.

*As problematic as the concept of perpetrator trauma may be, the issue of a trauma of guilt besetting subsequent generations and potentially leading to reactions ranging from acceptance to denial is unavoidable. The guilt from which the perpetrators had arrogantly distanced themselves is one that the Germans as a nation still have to confront; the crimes of the fathers and the grandfathers have been taken on by their children and grandchildren.* (Assmann, 2016, p. 78)

I will delve a bit more into the question of post-generational trauma before I turn again to the importance of responsibility to go beyond self-pity and to act politically for the present and future.

### **Guilt and cross-generational trauma: the role of education**

I have depicted different attitudes of dealing with the guilt question: refusal, confession, self-pity, self-hatred, and even pride in dealing successfully with history. All these seem to be unsatisfactory answers and attitudes. A very striking personal account of living with guilt as a German ancestor is presented by Wagner in an essayistic text from 2006. The essay is called “Nice German Guilt Feelings”. The author narrates his personal experience from a West German upbringing, from grade one in the 1970s to adulthood. How much of it is fiction is difficult to tell, but the story strikes a chord. Guilt had become part of the author’s identity. He even punished himself during his childhood. He slept on the ground without a warming cushion – the Jews in the concentration camp did not have warm eiderdown blankets, so why should he have? Absurdly, guilt had become somehow comforting for the author. He could miss the feeling of guilt that at some point had vanished from his life. Wagner wrote about his school experiences and about his teacher who taught about World War II and the Holocaust. This is a selection of what he narrated from being 7 years old in the 1970s:

*The Rhine Valley outside the classroom window was gradually filling up with corpses. The more I learned, the more pictures I saw, the more atrocities – shoved under my nose by Frau Klingmann (his teacher, my remarks) –*

*I leafed through, the more I learned about Hitler, the War, and the murder of European Jews – the higher the mountains of bodies rose, towering over the vineyards, pushing up against the Lorelei and over the castles. (Wagner, 2006, p. 766)*

*I didn't want to tell Frau Klingmann what my grandparents did during the Third Reich; I thought I was too deeply involved myself. And what they did or not do, so I thought, is my responsibility, too; that guilt, so I thought, is something I've inherited, just as their money. My bad conscience weighed like a heavy bedspread on and over me; I had to wear it the whole day. It hung from me like the long, stepped train of a cloak, or like a diver's weight; it was always with me, like a stuffed animal. And I was going to have to deal with it. (Wagner, 2006, p. 767)*

*Back when I was carrying the load all by myself – that was how it seemed to me – I couldn't come up with a better idea than sleeping on the floor beside my bed. I wasn't cold; guilt had tucked me in. And it was a soft place to lie down. My parent's house, a new, post-war one, had broadloom, of course, wall to wall. (Wagner, 2006, p. 773)*

Wagner wrote about childhood in silence – although World War II and the Holocaust were everywhere, he was alone and silenced with the guilt communicated to him during his education. His story touched me. I do not have the same experience of punishing myself. But I grew up having nightmares. Burning cities, my house in flames, I had to flee from it. Were these post-generational traumas inherited from my grandparents, or just the memories of films and documentaries, and literature I had been exposed to as a child? When I was 9 years old, we read a book about a Jewish family in school. In the middle of the night, the Nazis (I do not know who – SS soldiers?) knocked at the door and captured them all, putting them on a train to death camps. Nights weren't safe anymore; the worst could happen in your sleep when you expected it the least. This knocking on doors in the middle of the night. There is no safe space and no safe time. Teaching about World War II and the Holocaust made an impression on the grandchildren. But what do schools do? In an article on the ethics of writing and teaching the Holocaust for children, Kay Epstein, Michael Gray, and Alex Maws address the dilemma of teaching about the topic. On the one hand, the aim is to remember, and on the other hand, to prevent traumatising of the next generations. Teaching should lead to action. To enable the new generation to become actors of societal change. Epstein, Andrews, Gray, and Maws state that we simply do not know the effects of teaching about the Holocaust.

*There seems to me to be too little known about what actually happens to children when they read and hear about the Holocaust and see 'horrific images' from it. However, if we expect the results to be the creation of ethical members of society, we simply must analyse what we are doing to young people and why and how this affects them* (Epstein, Andrews, Gray, & Maws, 2013, p. 111).

Michael Zembylas is another author who has published on collective guilt and on teaching difficult histories. He asks how

*pedagogically productive is the idea of invoking feelings of collective guilt in classrooms. Is it pedagogically fruitful to teach children that they can learn about otherness from considering their own group guilt for crimes committed against others in its name?* (Zembylas, 2019, p. 404)

In school, we never talked about how to deal with the feeling of guilt. We did not talk about how we act as Germans when travelling to a country once occupied by Germany. We learned that being part of a silent mass is dangerous; we learned to raise our voices, to discuss and disagree. Teaching dialogue and discussion was a central approach of US re-education policies implemented in German education after 1945 (Goschler, 2020, p. 99). All these educational efforts were meant to make us into democratic citizens in our own country, to avoid a relapse into totalitarianism. But I was not prepared to encounter the past in other countries. I was not prepared for how to engage with others, with descendants of victims. When I was called a Nazi, or when I had to act as being a horse called Hitler, I just went silent. I doubt that the Norwegians at this conference ever had a school lesson about how to deal with Germans, their shared past, and complicated emotions. There do exist shared projects with other countries. For example, common history textbooks for France and Germany. Historians went into dialogue about the difficult past and different national history writing about it. The goal was to write school textbooks that enable multi-perspectivity, working for a common post-conflict society (Korostelina, 2020). There is nothing like this for Norway and Germany. Even though World War II is an important collective memory in Norway, actualized on National Day every year, no need is uttered, neither officially nor privately, to go into dialogue about the difficult shared past. Conflicts are buried – without being dead. We are haunted by its proclaimed absence.

## Reflective practice: Transformation and active choices

In my experience and in the process of narrating and analysing it, a lot of emotions were and are at play. I can identify several stages. Firstly, quiet acceptance – I did perform the Hitler horse, and I told only a few people about it. I almost forgot about the episode for a decade. But then, after living in Norway for many years and in a different personal and job environment, I started to feel anger about my experiences. I decided to write about the episode as a form of confrontation. Now, in the process of writing, reading, thinking, and applying theory to my case, I understand that neither reaction do not lead to anything good and constructive. Neither “to take” in a way of self-punishment nor to aggressively go to a counterattack is an adequate approach. Through reflective analysis, what initially seemed like an experience of humiliation transformed into an opportunity to interrogate different theoretical perspectives on historical guilt, responsibility, and post-generational trauma. This demonstrates the potential of reflexive methodologies in revealing hidden dynamics of memory and identity in transnational academic encounters. This process helped unlock a difficult and shameful topic, bring movement to a frozen memory, and create new possibilities for action. Helskog and Weiss (2023) refer to Thorsted and Hansen (2022) in their differentiation between event experience and insight experience. I have learned from the literature I have studied for this chapter. I learned about the revealing pride feeling, a typical way of building a positive national identity: at least we learned something (and you did not). I understood that there was a lot of shame and guilt that we never talked about. There was a striking silence in schools about how to navigate this historical heritage in interpersonal encounters. We had all the information but lacked the tools to act on it. Although Karl Jaspers wrote illuminatingly about this topic quite early. The insight experience has changed how I evaluate the experience today. It paved the way to acknowledge Jaspers’ suggestions. For Jaspers, guilt is aligned with freedom. We make choices, and we can make choices. The solution Jaspers is offering, the right attitude beyond self-pity and aggression, is conscious acceptance (Jaspers, 1965, p. 113). To admit vulnerability, to allow sadness, even to grieve. Aleida Assmann wrote that mourning and grief were and still are absent for the perpetrator descendants (Assmann, 2016, p. 87). It is not acceptable or possible to talk about German sufferings without aligning oneself with relativists. It is not acceptable to talk about the burden of living with the knowledge of our ancestors’ crimes. What is our burden compared to that of the victims? We can feel sad

about the guilt and the silence around it. We can allow sorrow and grief for ourselves, and then we must go on, a step out of introspection (Jaspers, 1965, pp. 101–102). According to Jaspers, the right way to deal with guilt is “modest resignation” and “unaggressive silence” (Jaspers, 1965, pp. 113–115). Neither sorrow nor anger. Unaggressive silence. What may this be, and how could this lead to action for the present and future?

### **Meeting the Others: nationalism and cosmopolitanism**

I will conclude with some theoretical reflections on possible implications for the future. Jaspers suggested unaggressive silence. I would like to link this with Sharon Todd’s take on relational ethics. Referring to Levinas, Todd stresses the importance of listening to the other and acknowledging different lived experiences. It is our responsibility to let the other be in their otherness and to accept alterity (Todd, 2003, p. 2). Responsibility is not about performing something we have learned “as though it were merely a performance of a code, but on the alertness and vigilance we bring to our own response in the context of listening” (Todd, 2003, p. 146). It is active listening, listening that hears the other without comparing to oneself.

I have started my reflection by identifying as a cosmopolitical academic. Something beyond the nation-state and fixed identities that lead to antagonistic relationships with others. This might have been naïve cosmopolitanism (Anderson, 2006, p. 74). It made sense with my local German historical background, but it clashed with a different role of Norwegian university and intellectuals. Naïve cosmopolitanism had led me to universalisation and generalization: the assumption that we academics were alike, a class of denationalized intellectuals. Whilst I was perceived as an impersonation of a difficult history, and possibly the impersonation of neoliberal globalization of the academic world. Cosmopolitanism has been criticized for being blind to power imbalances, a project of the privileged Western elite. This goes together with the post-colonial critique of Western universalistic thinking (Kent & Tomsy, 2017; Welch, 2021). Anderson cites Julia Kristeva when pointing out that only strangeness is universal (Anderson, 2006, p. 90). Beyond universalism, cosmopolitanism, and antagonistic national identities, we can think with the concept of alterity. To accept the other, with different experiences and controversial emotions. To understand them in their specific contexts, the position to speak and act from (Berger, 2020). To see the other and listen to them in their otherness – and to allow

oneself to be transformed in the process – is, so far, the most enlightening lesson I have taken from writing and reflecting on my experience. In consequence, we should foster reflective, open-minded dialogical academic spaces where we can work, listen, and think with others in transnational academic communities – just as we did in working on this anthology. This project illustrates how reflective engagement with historical memory can foster deeper awareness in transnational academic spaces, offering a path beyond inherited narratives of guilt and towards meaningful dialogue.

## Notes

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# CHAPTER 13: FROM GEOPOLITICS TO RARE EARTHS IN TEACHER EDUCATION

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## **Abstract**

*Our modern world increasingly relies on most elements from the periodic table to sustain technological progress, enabled by global cooperation, complex supply chains, and free trade under the WTO. However, this system is fracturing as the Liberal International Order weakens, while climate experts stress the urgent need for global collaboration. As a teacher educator in geopolitics, I find that sustainability discussions often overlook geopolitical perspectives. Most of us think within disciplinary silos. Inviting an American Rare Earth Elements (REE) expert into my Norwegian classroom was a concrete example of Internationalization in Higher Education, leading to more than I anticipated. His insights on REEs, supply chain vulnerabilities, and China's dominance over critical materials reshaped my understanding and that of my students, shifting our perspective toward systems thinking and material realities. The expert lectures on REEs exemplified how these elements connect geopolitics, the green shift, and the modern economy – all depend on rare earths.*

## **Key words:**

Rare Earth Elements (REE) – Systems thinking – Internationalization in Higher Education – Geopolitics – The green shift – Material realities

## **Prologue:**

For the past six years, I have taught geopolitics in the teacher education social studies programme. During this time, I developed a geopolitics model and have since regularly refined and updated it, using it as an instructive example for students to learn how to employ modelling as a didactical tool in the classroom. The model can be used as a starting point for analysing any state's (or the EU's) geopolitical situation in the world and includes many concepts/terms to reveal a state's strengths or weaknesses.

One key aspect of the model that became increasingly evident was China's dominance in the whole supply chain of many important materials. In the media and among policymakers, it seemed the significance of Critical Raw Materials (CRMs) and China's dominance in this domain became more pronounced and frequently discussed. Notably, the European Union, the United States, and Japan were publishing detailed lists, every other year or so, of CRMs that underscored China's preeminent position in this crucial arena.

Among the various CRMs, one particular group that caught my attention was the seventeen Rare Earth Elements (REEs), which China held in a near-complete monopoly. While I acknowledged the importance of REEs and included them in my model, I recognised the need for a deeper understanding of why they were so crucial. Moreover, if REEs were so important, why would not the most advanced and richest countries on earth (USA, EU, and Japan) just develop their own complete supply chain? It did not make sense to me. Lindseth (2020, p. 83) might call this an experience of a discrepancy, or that the inner does not align with the outer.

This led me to look into the world of REEs to gain a better understanding of their significance and implications. My goal was simple: to comprehend the extent of the West's reliance on China for these critical elements and the challenges the EU and the US would encounter if they were to establish independent supply chains.

In researching REEs, I soon found that they are essential not only for military equipment, but also for many modern electronic gadgets such as smartphones and airpods, and for technologies that are part of the green shift, like electric vehicles and wind turbines. These elements thus seemed to be vital on many fronts, and I was surprised to find that the US had been a world leader in REE production in the past. How did China end up in this position?

From the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s, the US at the Mountain Pass REE Mine was the global leader in rare earth oxides (Nakano, 2021, p. 9; Scheyder, 2024, pp. 98–99). Then, slowly China started its journey to become dominant in rare earths. I encountered China's strategic intent, dating back to the 1990s when Deng Xiaoping likened China's role to that of OPEC for rare earths (Erickson & Collins, 2019; Nakano, 2021, p. 5; and Kalantzakos, 2018, who extensively documents China's mineral geostrategy). This strategic intent coincided with growing environmental concerns associated with REE mining and processing in the West, as well as the allure of outsourcing rare earth production. Notably, REE production at

Mountain Pass in the USA shut down in 2002 (Green, 2019). As globalization kept integrating the world, there were few worries that China would increasingly dominate the rare earth supply and other metals. Until a significant turning point in 2010, when China strategically used its REE monopoly during a dispute with Japan, resulting in the temporary withholding of exports. Prices spiked, creating a global scramble for processed rare earths. This incident prompted responses from the EU, Japan, and the US, complaining to the WTO and leading to the compilation of lists of critical raw materials (Nakano, 2021, p. 11; see also Scheyder, 2024, pp. 111–112). For Japan the incident drove a strategy to invest and help other resource-rich countries (Australia and eventually Malaysia) to develop rare earths, and in 2023, the country had reduced its dependence on China for REE from 90 per cent to about 60 per cent (Terazawa, 2023, October; see also Chomon, 2024, pp. 57–58). This has similarities to the 1973 oil crisis.

In the US, there were hopes of making the Mountain Pass Mine into a complete mine-to-magnet supply chain due to the high prices and national security concerns the crisis had raised. Molycorp, the then-owner of the mine, reopened it and invested heavily to reach this goal. However, in 2012, China flooded the market with REEs, prices dropped, and a few years later, Molycorp filed for bankruptcy protection (Scheyder, 2024, pp. 112–113). Today the EU and the US are still trying to break their Chinese REE dependence (Nakano, 2021, pp. 20–23), and although Mountain Pass Mine has been reopened by MP Materials, their REE concentrates must be sent to China for further refining, and the company is partly owned by a Chinese REE business, Shenghe Resources (Scheyder, 2024, pp. 118–119). Japan's position in the REE market is slightly better, as it makes its own magnets, which is the final step, and get some of its supply from outside China (Terazawa, 2023 and Chomon, 2024, pp. 57–58). The EU does not have its own supply of REE.

I still wondered why it seemed so difficult to develop a complete REE supply chain outside of China. Especially when rare earths seemed so crucial to so many things.

My curiosity deepened as I occasionally came across the possibility of one of Europe's largest REE deposits in Norway, situated just a few hours' drive from my classroom at the Fen Complex, Fensfeltet in Norwegian (Sintef, 2023; see the long history about the Fen Complex here: Simonsen, 2023). The possible importance of developing this mine grew on September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2022, when EU Commission President Ursula von der

Leyen emphasised the growing significance of REEs in her state of the union address. She stated that:

Lithium and rare earths will soon be more important than oil and gas. Our demand for rare earths alone will increase fivefold by 2030. [...] We must avoid becoming dependent again, as we did with oil and gas. [...] We will identify strategic projects all along the supply chain, from extraction to refining, from processing to recycling. And we will build up strategic reserves where supply is at risk. This is why today I am announcing a European Critical Raw Materials Act. (von der Leyen, 2022).

Rare earths started to fascinate me, and I wanted to learn more. Moreover, I realized that these elements were integral to broader global systems, including the transition away from fossil fuels to combat global warming, the geopolitical vulnerabilities in a changing world order, and as examples of how the global just-in-time economy relies on almost every element of the periodic table. Additionally, the Fen Complex was connecting the local with the global. And currently there are no rare earth mines in Europe.

As a teacher educator, I saw REEs as a perfect interdisciplinary example for my students and an opportunity to, in a Klafki-inspired way, explore a specific subject deeply to reveal the complexities of broader systems. I began searching for someone to engage with me and the students.

I called geologists working at the Fen Complex and emailed and talked to a Norwegian metallurgist with experience from China and several people associated with the various REE processing start-ups in Norway. But none of them had the time to come to our campus. From the conversations, I learned a lot, and I became more certain that to understand some of the complexity in the field of rare earth extraction and business, I needed to find actual practitioners. It also became evident that having individuals associated with the Green Party or environmental advisors with theoretical backgrounds wasn't enough. I needed someone with concrete hands-on experience who could give concrete insights from within the business. Lindseth (2020, p. 82) calls this practical knowledge '*svarevne*', which might translate to the "ability to respond" or "respons-ability".

Then, luck hit me in one of my conversations with someone involved in launching an REE-processing facility in Norway. The man I talked to seemed very busy, and I had the feeling that he did not have the time to talk to me. To end the conversation, he said, "... maybe you can try and talk to my colleague, David; he might be willing to engage with you". I accepted and received an email with David's contact information. When I

saw his full name, David O'Brock, I got the feeling that I had heard the name before. It must have been in one of the books I had read.

I looked through my bookshelf and found him in Chapter 4 of a book called *The Elements of Power: Gadgets, Guns, and the Struggle for a Sustainable Future in the Rare Metal Age* by David S. Abraham (2015).

This was it! David O'Brock was the former CEO of Silmet (now called NEO), which was the only rare earth processing plant in Europe (Jüris, 2023), and Johnston, Hancock, et al. Dempsey 2023). I reread the chapter where O'Brock is showing author Abraham around the rare earth separation plant located in a small Estonian town close to the Russian border. It dawned on me that this American, David O'Brock, is one of the few people outside of China with real practical expertise in the very specialized field of rare earth elements.<sup>2</sup> O'Brock possesses a rare perspective in the REE business, having hands-on experience in both REE processing and navigating the market, which is heavily dominated by Chinese companies under strong state influence (see, for instance, Allen (2023), Bradford (2023) or Erickson & Collins (2019), and Kalantzakos, 2017)).

I contacted Mr. O'Brock, and he generously agreed to come and share his knowledge with me and my students. The interactions with him and his lectures not only expanded my perspective but also profoundly influenced how I see the world and teach geopolitics. Moreover, it was an experience that seemed to engage the students because it touched upon several themes that they find important and relevant. This is also an example of internationalization at home. We stayed on campus, but we brought an expert perspective from abroad to our classroom.

## **The lectures by David O'Brock: From Mine to Magnets**

### ***The first lecture***

David O'Brock, a seasoned veteran of the global mining industry, now stands before my eager students. I had invited him to share his insights on rare earth elements (REEs). His first lecture of the day, titled 'From Mine to Magnets', goes into the entire process, spanning roughly 34 intricate steps, that transforms raw ore into the pure REEs essential for creating super magnets.

With an engaging start, he poses questions to the students about their electronic gadgets – smartphones, electric vehicles, flat-screen TVs, digital

cameras, and green energy-producing wind turbines. Do they realize that all these technologies rely on REEs?

“Consider your smartphone”, he explains. “REEs, make it vibrate on silent mode, reside in the speaker and microphone, give life to the display’s colours, and some even give it that radiant glow. These elements are like hidden vitamins or spices in our everyday technology. We might not think of them as essential, but their absence would certainly be noticeable”.

“The main thing to consider, when thinking about REEs, is the ones that are used in magnets”, he says. “That’s what the rare earths are normally needed for and what you want to produce if you are in the business”.

He goes on to talk about how REEs also play significant roles in larger quantities – for example, an F-35 jet plane contains more than 400 kilos of REEs in its electronic systems, radars, and the electric motors in the rudders of a plane. Luckily, he shows a photo, so we understand what a rudder is. REEs are also used in military night-vision equipment and different communication systems and are helping nuclear submarines move forward. Electric vehicles house several kilos of REE magnets, and wind turbines more than half a tonne.

It’s a captivating introduction. What might have seemed mundane initially now seems to have caught the interest of the students. Some are probably interested because of REEs’ relevance in green technologies, others because of the military and thus geopolitical importance, but what really caught everyone’s attention, I think, is how essential REEs are for electronic gadgets and smartphones.

Continuing from this engaging introduction, O’Brock embarks on a meticulous, step-by-step journey through the entire REE extraction process. He takes us through the intricate procedures, from identifying mineable ores to over 30 processing and refining stages required to separate REEs from other metals and from each other. To many students, I can interpret from their body language that this is painstakingly detailed – precisely what I had asked of them. From our preparation talks, I knew that this concretization part would underscore that getting these tiny elements pure enough for a finished magnet in a finished Tesla is not an easy process. And even though I am sure he simplified the processes, my own understanding of the intricacy and complexity widened.

We witness the entire journey, including milling, stone cracking, shaking, liquefying processes, pulverization, and more, until we have every REE in a pure, powdery form. These elements can then be alloyed with other

metals, he explains, to power the modern technologies we often take for granted.

However, he doesn't shy away from addressing the environmental implications. He points out that the whole process consumes extensive amounts of water and generates substantial waste, often contaminated with radioactive elements like thorium. The disposal of this waste poses challenges, and he displays a striking image of an artificial lake formed by radioactive waste from rare earth production facilities in Bayan Obo, Inner Mongolia, China. He emphasises that China's near monopoly on REE processing and refining is partly due to relaxed environmental regulations.

O'Brock then delivers this reality with a matter-of-fact tone, emphasizing China's geostrategic advantage in dominating the industry. "To China, rare earths aren't just about profits; they're about geopolitics . . . Business is different when it is more important for the monopolist to keep the monopoly than to make money". He goes on to talk about how this aspect has led many REE startups in the West to bankruptcy because China has lowered its prices and basically sold at a loss to hinder the developing REE supply chains that are not dependent on China. I realize the peculiarity of this situation for Western companies that compete with Chinese companies under what is supposed to be the same WTO framework of rules that is supposed to secure fair and free competition.

The first lecture concludes, and we take a break. I overhear students engaged in discussions about REEs and their role in phones. Many who initially found the processing details boring are now fascinated by our international guest speaker – his deep knowledge and confident American demeanour. I shared many of the same feelings. After having read many articles and books on the topic, I could explain some of what O'Brock lectured on, but this was different, deeper, and more hands-on. It was probably as close to 'show', not 'tell', as my class and I were going to get concerning rare earths, and I felt some of his deep understanding was rubbing off on me.

### ***From magnets to magnets – The recycling dilemma***

In the second lecture, titled 'From Magnets to Magnets', the focus shifts to recycling. After witnessing the resource-intensive 'From Mine to Magnet' process and its environmental impact, the students naturally see recycling as a solution. Mr. O'Brock informs us that only 1% of REEs are currently recycled.



He explains why one can't simply remove a magnet from an old car and place it in a new one. Electric vehicles, it turns out, haven't been designed with recycling in mind, and the act of removing and reinstalling the magnet diminishes its effectiveness. He actually tried to do it himself, with no luck. O'Brock shows a picture of himself trying to remove magnets from his car without breaking them. He is a doer, he says; he cannot only read things in books; to understand them, he wants to go and try it. I am more of a reader myself, but I can feel the effect of his concrete approach. I knew about the low recycling rate before he talked about it, but the photo of him sitting there trying to remove a magnet from his own car makes it more real.

Another issue he focuses on is that many REEs in various technologies are present in minute quantities, making their separation a costly and polluting process. Just like the mining of REEs has the problem that their concentration in the ore is very small, so that they normally need to be extracted as a by-product from other metals in bigger concentrations.

"For recycling to be viable", he stresses, "we need scale". At present, there simply aren't enough electric vehicles being recycled. And considering that the world still mainly drives fossil-fuelled cars, we would need a lot of mining before we actually have enough metals to be recycled to secure circularity. We would, due to the current geopolitical dynamics, expect a lot more mining and processing facilities in the West. This would take a lot of time and probably face a lot of opposition. Who wants a mine, or a processing facility close to where they live? Developing a complete supply chain, from mine to magnet, would mean handling a lot of waste as well. But this will need to be done a lot better than the radioactive lake in Inner Mongolia. Mining and processing have consequences that the West, for the most part, has outsourced to the rest of the world, and particularly China.

"So, how do we resolve this dilemma?" our speaker says, challenging the class. Various answers surface, but one older gentleman, who had asked to sit in on the lecture, suggests the simplest solution: "Stop using new technologies." O'Brock presents this suggestion to the students as a question, "He's right, isn't he? Can you just stop using modern technologies, like your smartphones?" The students vehemently oppose the idea.

As we break for lunch, I engage in conversations with students who now see the world through a different lens, shaped by our encounter with the international guest speaker who offered a real, concrete experience. At least as concrete as we can get regarding REE processing, since this is something that China is currently more or less a monopolist in doing. I have many of the same feelings as the students: Rare earths in particular, and material

use and mining in general, seemed less difficult and complex before the encounter with David O'Brock. I think about the Dunning-Kruger effect and how easy it is to overestimate one's own competence in this highly specialized and complex modern world we live in. Hijazi (2023, p. 77) captures my sentiment: "A result of the complexity and richness of reality is that our knowledge of the world is in a state of perpetual incompleteness".

As I walk David O'Brock to his train, I ask if the West will soon break free from China's geopolitical, rare-earth stranglehold, and he says that currently it is still a long way to go. The American attempt at reopening Mountain Pass – the mine that has been reopened once again – is still having to send its REE concentrates to China for the completion into magnets. A lot of practical expertise has been waning away in the West, so this might still take some time, and there is also a lot of specialized equipment that may take time to develop, he says.

At the train station, I thank him, and he gracefully agrees to come back sometime the following year and do something similar. In his hand is the mug I gave him with the university's initials on it. I am very grateful that he took one full day off work to come and spend a day with us. We learnt a lot from him, and he seems happy to have been compensated with a modest mug.

## **Critical reflection: What is at stake?**

When I reflect on the richly narrated experience, I would like to emphasize a few topics that are at stake. These are a) material consequences, b) the recycling dilemma, c) global climate vs. geopolitical realities and Norway's place and d) internationalization at home.

### ***a) Material consequences***

Of course, it is obvious that smartphones, electric vehicles, and wind turbines need a lot of materials – if you think about it. However, since we in Norway are so insulated from the making of these products, we mostly do not realize or consider the complexity and consequences of making them. We swim in end products and are quite unaware of their life journey.

These lectures, in a sense, *rematerialized* the world for me. I am surrounded by processed materials, and I now look at them from a different perspective, a material perspective: Where do these things come from? How

are they made? Which input factors are needed? How is the journey of the material affecting nature and people?

The lectures brought me closer to material reality, and Mr. O'Brock's detailed explanation of the whole process from mine to magnet also contributed to a better understanding of what could await Norway and our local environment in the near future.

We are the best in the world at importing electric vehicles; now we need to take part in the making of them. Questions that have been abstract and disconnected in Norway due to global supply chains are becoming real and concrete due to both climate and geopolitical realities. We need to talk about mines, processing, waste disposal and locations for these facilities.

When the old man suggested the alternative – stop using modern things – both I and the students disagreed. Our insular period is ending; we are getting skin in the game (Taleb, 2018).

It is a lot easier to accept consequences that only affect other people or do the right thing (buy an EV) when there is no downside to it. The interactions with the REE expert made me pay closer attention to the material foundation of our modern society. For instance, while driving home from squash practice, most evenings my local tunnel is closed due to maintenance. I did not notice before or think about the material implications of this; now I wonder how much material goes into the maintenance of the tunnel?

### ***b) The recycling dilemma***

If we do not want to dig more into the ground than necessary, we need to recycle. Until the interactions with Mr. O'Brock, I did not realize that this was an issue in Norway. In my house, I have four different trash cans, and outside, there are even more alternatives for different waste. The dumps in Norway do not really look like dumps anymore. A Norwegian dump is now referred to as a recycling centre. My local centre may have more than forty different containers for separate materials. In my concrete reality, I have the impression that anything can be recycled. Circular materials use must be within reach if the rest of the world only copies Norway.

David O'Brock proposed that Rare Earth Elements (REE) are almost never recycled. When he showed the photo of himself trying to remove magnets from his own car and told us how difficult it was, I started to wonder what else might not be recycled when I hand it in. Once again, I got the feeling that something I had taken for granted in my material reality did not

match the actual reality. Moreover, I realized how easy it is to be fooled in our complex societies. Recycling seems easy when my only experience is to sort my waste at home and occasionally drive to a recycling centre and sort my waste. If not even larger magnets in an EV are recycled because of poor design, lack of scale, and thus high cost, what about elements within all these tiny gadgets we use? And since the imperative of the green shift is to replace all fossil transportation, we will need a lot more extraction before circularity is even possible.

### ***c) Global climate vs. geopolitical realities and Norway's place:***

The lecture emphasized the critical role of rare earth elements in the green transition, modern life, and geopolitics. From my background in geopolitics, I was aware of the significance of REEs and had witnessed the EU, Japan, and the USA declaring their intentions to reduce reliance on China. When it comes to climate and the green transition, Mr. O'Brock clearly illustrated how REEs are vital in green technology. And how they are not only essential for our modern lives, filled with smartphones and gadgets we consider indispensable, but also, from a geopolitical perspective, especially considering their use in military equipment. For the lecture, I think it was very important that he showed the very clear relevance for the students through emphasizing how the REEs make their phones work.

O'Brock explicitly stated that, for China, REEs hold geostrategic importance; their focus is on preserving the rest of the world's dependence on them, rather than making money. I could sense his frustration after having to deal with this for many years in the REE business. How must it be for a Western REE start-up that believes and relies on a market logic to face competition from Chinese companies that play by national security logics?

It served as a clear example of one great discrepancy I feel when I hear discussions on global warming; while the global battle against climate change necessitates cooperation and the most efficient use of resources, geopolitical realities drive the three wealthiest actors in global politics to seek independence from China's monopoly.

For the Norwegian state, this implies more concrete consequences concerning resource extraction for the green transition, with all the implications it carries for the local environment, discussions involving "not in my backyard" (NIMBY), and, significantly, the geopolitical needs of the EU. Both global climate action and international geopolitics are coming closer to our

doorstep

This experience solidified a perception of mine that the equations do not add up. Climate action requires global cooperation, but the world of geopolitics is increasingly tilting towards conflict, security, and self-sufficiency. While the climate issue is naturally global, the system of states operates at an international level, meaning between states with different interests. In geopolitics, we observe challenges, particularly from Russia and China, to the so-called liberal world order led by the USA. When international orders are destabilized, history indicates that there will be more conflict (Braumoeller, 2019).

There is an ongoing war between Europe's two largest states, Russia and Ukraine, an increase in global military expenditures, growing resource consumption, and emissions increase. The US and China are the two largest emitters and are currently in what seems like an arms race. Moreover, domestic politics in the US is very polarized.

The logic of states revolves around ensuring their own survival. In Realist IR theories, this is explicit, whereas in Liberalism, it is implied: Doyle (1983, p. 223) implicitly argues that Liberalism prioritizes state survival, as its institutions are designed to prepare for foreign threats and restrain internal aggression. If a state fails to defend itself, its liberal institutions and values become irrelevant.

The logic of the climate system and those working within it is centred on global cooperation to maintain a habitable planet for all. This is not just their mission – it is a reality. Stopping global warming requires replacing fossil fuels as an energy source, which demands extensive international collaboration. From within the climate system, nothing can logically be more important than this goal.

However, the logic of state security operates differently. For states, national survival is paramount, and when security is at stake, everything else – including climate action – becomes secondary. While both systems pursue what they see as the most important goal, states hold vastly more resources and political power than the climate system. When national security is threatened, the priorities of states quickly take priority over those of climate institutions and scientific communities. In moments of crisis, few concern themselves with climate change, no matter how real and urgent the problem remains.

On this issue, the lecture confirmed my own feeling of discrepancy between the worldview of the global climate leaders and the geopolitical realities that inform major states' security thinking. The geopolitical realities are far-reaching, the global climate cooperation needs to be deep and far

reaching. REEs are an ingrained part of both realities. In this part, I sound clearer than I did; I forget how occupied I was with my one geopolitical system. The clear connections that I have now written out are a result of the lecture.

#### ***d) Internationalization at home***

I had already acknowledged that my understanding of REEs was far from sufficient (Lindseth, 2020, p. 99). That is why I ended up inviting O'Brock. Initially, my goal was simply to improve my geopolitical model, but through a deep dive into the practicalities of REEs, I now see how much more was at stake.

The collaboration with David O'Brock did not just provide theoretical insights; it also rematerialized both me and my students. We now understand better the importance of minerals and materials in geopolitics, climate policies, and supply chain security. Instead of remaining at an abstract level, O'Brock showed us very concretely how mining, processing, and recycling actually work, why recycling is so difficult, and how China uses its REE monopoly as a geopolitical tool. What we learned was not just knowledge; it was knowledge with "svarevne" (Lindseth, 2020, p. 82), meaning practical knowledge from someone who had actual experience. And of course, in-depth knowledge has a tendency to increase complexity.

My students, most of whom are now teachers, are better prepared to engage with the increasing dilemmas of mining in Norway. From climate vs. nature trade-offs to the role of Indigenous rights in resource extraction to geopolitics, they can now teach about why minerals are essential for the green shift and give concrete examples from REEs.

I did not expect that I would now be part of a research group named Fensfeltet (the Fen Complex) that now includes historians, mathematicians, geologists, music educators, and faculty from early childhood teacher education. They came to the lectures, most of them with little prior knowledge about REEs.

The REE lectures opened the door for me to think in systems and materials and broadened my scholarly interests.

Our collaboration with David O'Brock has continued, and he has already been back for another lecture and a meeting with the research group.

## Theoretical reflection

“I am what I see, I see what I am,” writes Ahmad Hijazi (2023, p. 66), in a compelling reflective aphorism. His book is about how we humans navigate an increasingly complex world, and to make sense of all the things we do not really understand, we approximate. By that, he means that we simplify detailed information into something general or something we are already familiar with. This way of thinking helps us handle complex situations more easily, but it might also cause us to miss out on the full detail and variety of the world around us. The aphorism also relates to *bounded rationality*, introduced by Herbert Simon (Simon, H.A., 1990), which Meadows (2008, p. 87) describes as, “The logic that leads to decisions or actions that make sense within one part of a system but are not reasonable within a broader context or when seen as part of the wider system.” Martin Wolf (2022) of the Financial Times argues that it might be “... convenient to think about the world in intellectual silos” and that this might work well in a stable world; however, to navigate “... today’s storms ... we have to think systematically”. Moreover, “It is not just theoretically true that everything depends on everything else. It is a truth we can no longer ignore in practice ... silos are perilous”.

To address global challenges such as climate change, escalating conflicts, mineral shortages/material overuse, and growing community polarization, the imperative to understand perspectives beyond our bounded knowledge is clear. This requirement is central to the kaleidoscopic approach advocated by Helskog and Weiss (2023, pp. 22–27), which posits that to better comprehend the multilayered nature of complex issues, we must engage in an active, holistic exploration of different viewpoints. They write, “Within a kaleidoscopic epistemology, opposite perspectives can shed light on different elements of a phenomenon and be meaningful in their own right” (p. 23). This dynamic ability to shift perspectives reveals that “... instead of fixating on one pattern, several patterns can dynamically enlighten each other, bringing out a bigger and truer picture of complex issues” (p. 23).

The phenomenon of this essay is, of course, rare earth elements; they stay with us as we twist the kaleidoscope.

## 1 Material consequences: disconnected from material reality

As is with rare earths, most materials need to be dug out of the ground somewhere. As Dana Meadows writes (2008, p. 95), “Of course, cars don’t come from a cloud, they come from the transformation of a stock of raw materials . . . .”. And the green shift requires a lot of minerals; the International Energy Agency (IEA, 2024) writes that “ . . . a concerted effort to reach the goals of the Paris Agreement (climate stabilization at ‘well below 2°C global temperature rise’, as in the SDS) would mean a *quadrupling of mineral* requirements for clean energy technologies by 2040. An even faster transition, to hit net-zero globally by 2050, would require six times more mineral inputs in 2040 than today.” Considering REEs, they find: “Like-wise rare earth elements may see three to seven times higher demand in 2040 than today, depending on the choice of wind turbines and the strength of policy support.” When it comes to mining revenues, the same IEA summary says that revenues from coal mines today are ten times larger than revenues from energy transition minerals.

In a coauthored article at Euractiv.com, the executive director of IEA, Fatih Birol, and the chair of the Environmental Committee in the European Parliament, Pascal Canfin, write that the reliance on imported materials continues to be a cause of concern in many EU member states. They insist that critical minerals should not be considered a sideshow: “. . . instead they are part of the main event as Europe moves to a net zero energy future.” Birol & Canfin (2023).

For rare earths, the fact is that Europe does not have a mine. There are prospects for one in Sweden, and there are prospects in Norway at the Fen Complex. The IEA (2024) has analysed the development lead time of mining projects to an average of 16.5 years.

For the last few years, Nordic Mining has been working to open Norway’s first mine in nearly 40 years. It will produce a titanium oxide, which is on the EU list of Critical Minerals (Valmot, 2023, January 19). However, mining is not good for nature, and the company’s plan to dispose of waste in the local fjord is currently in the legal system, as they have been taken there by a nature conservation organization. This is not unique for Norway. Reuters journalist Ernest Scheyder (2024) recently published a book about different American communities, including different indigenous groups and even botanists (defending the Thiem Buckwheat that thrives on lithium soil), that are fighting to keep mining away from their own backyard.



It is very easy to be pro-climate and the green transition if it has no cost but only benefits. In Norway, we enjoy many end products like the Teslas that the Norwegian state has subsidized. But now this is changing. And I sense that the new tensions increasingly divide people who used to agree, because the consequences of the green shift were felt elsewhere.

There are already wind farms put up in several places, and they are, of course, disturbing nature, and people are angry. The decision to develop the electric grid in Northern Norway, in connection with the electrification of an LNG gas plant at Melkøya island, is a perfect example of material consequences. In this area, there are different interests at stake in conflict over where a power cable should go: the industry that benefits vs. both fishermen and Sami people that lose, the Norwegian state against Sami interests, and nature concerns against climate needs. This, in turn, has led to political unrest within parties, regions, and local communities and between parties, regions, and local communities (Rustad, 2023).

We are slowly becoming rematerialized, and if we want a green transition, a lot more mining and a lot more wind farms, and a lot more grid development will come. Especially since the OECD can report that the countries that have been exporting most of the critical minerals to the OECD countries, like Russia and China, are increasingly restricting their exports. (Kowalski & Legendre, 2023, pp. 5–6). It is easy to approximate that setting up mineral supply chains can be done quickly if we need it, but mineral extraction has many obstacles.

Part of my rematerialisation has been that I noticed material use everywhere; I mentioned the tunnel in my hometown that is closed most nights for maintenance. Apparently, built structure, also known as in-use stock, locks in a lot of future material use this way.

Krausmann et al. (2017) of the Universität für Bodenkultur (BOKU) school in Vienna, known for their research on material metabolism, found that roughly 50% of all materials extracted annually are used to augment or update existing material stocks (buildings, infrastructure etc.). Their analysis from 1900 to 2010 shows a 23-fold increase in global material stocks. And since globally we keep using more materials, only 12% of the inflow of materials comes from recycling. Developing countries are expected to drive further increases in material extraction through construction and infrastructure building. If developing countries' material stocks are to match that of industrialized states, stocks would need to be quadrupled. Which in turn will drive CO<sub>2</sub> emissions past climate targets.

This is a material reality, and I wonder how industrialized nations, which have locked in so much future material use through existing infrastructure, can tell developing countries that they should build less?

Ed Conway writes in his book *Material World* (2023, p. 197) that in developed economies every person has about 15 tonnes (15000 kg) of steel surrounding their life. This is the skeleton of hospitals, schools, houses, bridges, railways etc. Steel may be as good a measure of development as GDP. On average there are 4 tonnes of steel per person in the world. China, which has been building more than any other country in the last decades, is averaging about 7 tonnes per person. In Sub-Saharan Africa there is less than 1 tonne of steel surrounding each person (Conway, 2023, p. 203). So maybe 15 tonnes per person is a satiation level for steel?

Vélez-Henao and Pauliuk (2023), have developed a material requirement of a decent living standard, which details a minimum material requirement of about 6 tonnes per person per year for housing, school buildings, clothes, food etc. But I do not think that most people will stop at that level if they get there. Why would any people in the developing world stop increasing their material use before they reach the level of developed economies? It is a reinforcing cycle. More materials mean better access to school, for instance, which may improve chances of further material acquisitions.

The energy and material expert Vaclav Smil wrote a book called *Growth* (2019) that shows how humans and all human-made systems cannot seem to stop an endless journey of expansion. In an interview about the book, Smil says, "... I wanted to put it all together under one roof so people could see how these things are inevitably connected and how it all shares one crystal clarity: that growth must come to an end. Our economist friends don't seem to realise that." (Watts, 2019, September 21). As for the green shift, Smil is very sceptical and has no faith in the world reaching net zero by 2050.

Smil is a numbers man who does not like approximations. In his 2022 book titled *How the World Really Works*, the introduction (pp. 1–11) captures the theoretical framework for this reflection perfectly. On page 2, he writes that most people in modern societies have a very superficial understanding of how the world really works. The reason for this is that we are so *disconnected* from how food, energy, materials, machines, and devices are produced that we barely even approximate. More than 80% in affluent countries live in cities. "People are constantly interacting with black boxes, whose relatively simple outputs require little or no comprehension of what is taking place inside the box". And most of our experts are so specialized

that “... experts in particle physics would find it very hard to understand even the first page of a new research paper in viral immunology. Obviously, atomization of knowledge has not made any public decision-making any easier.” (Smil, 2022, p. 2). He is also pointing out that most jobs that are highly rewarded “... are for work completely removed from the material realities of the earth” (p. 4). As for the green shift, he provides one dry comparison: “... in 2020 the average annual per capita energy supply of about 40 percent of the world’s population (3.1 billion people) ... was no higher than the rate achieved in both Germany and France in 1860!” (p. 5). If these 3.1 billion should reach what Smil calls a dignified standard of living, they would need to double or maybe even triple their energy use, with all its consequences to the biosphere. Four pillars of materials that sustain modern civilization – steel, concrete, plastic, and ammonia – Smil says, are foundational material realities that are really hard to decarbonise or substitute. “In absolute terms, material demands have been rising in the world’s most affluent societies, and they remain far below any conceivable saturation level in low-income countries ... ” (Smil, 2022, pp. 6–7). As for our historic energy use, J.B. Fressoz (2024) recently wrote a book about how we have never transitioned from one energy source to the other. In fact, he shows that in absolute numbers we keep using more of all energy sources as new ones are added. So, we have never quit using any source of energy, which is related to Stanley Jevons’ famous paradox. The green shift is about quitting fossil energy altogether. Considering Smil’s remarks on how billions of people would require double or triple their energy use to reach a dignified standard of living and the prospect of world population increasing with nearly 2 billion more people in the next 30 years (United Nations n.d.), net zero by 2050 looks difficult.

I find Smil convincing, and I think a realistic material perspective is often overlooked. I wonder about all the other perspectives that I do not even realize exist.

## **2 The recycling dilemma: we need a circular economy.**

Only one per cent of rare earths are currently being recycled. One reason for this is that we do not hand in all our old electronic gadgets and phones. Instead, they are lurking in our junk drawers at home (Tabuchi, 2024, January 20). But even if we were handing them in, it would be both costly and technologically difficult to recycle the REEs because they are often in

minute quantities and alloyed with other metals. Sprecher, Kleijn, R. et al. (2014) investigated the possibility of recycling one important rare earth element (remember there are 17 REEs in total), neodymium, from hard disk drives, and found many of the same obstacles: quantity, alloys, and cost. Globally, less than 20% of e-waste is properly managed (Rizos, & Bryhn, 2022, p. 2).

Reese & Hoffman (2021) claim that economically speaking, recycling makes little sense if you include all the factors from transport and water to rinse to machines or humans to take apart the different pieces and so on (pp. 49–50). It is easy to approximate that an iPhone with more than sixty different elements in it, including gold, should be valuable to recycle. I recently argued with my local electronics store because they said my used iPhone was worth next to nothing. I argued that all the elements inside, including the rare earths, are really difficult to process, but it was to no avail, and I returned home frustrated.

Why is the economic return from recycling smartphones surprisingly low? Reese & Hoffman (2021, pp. 107–111) write that the gold in an iPhone is valued at around 65 cents, and the phone's total scrap value, including metals like copper and nickel, remains modest. An iPhone 6 also contains about 31 grams of aluminium, valued at merely a nickel, considering aluminium's market price of \$1,500 per tonne. This marginal financial incentive, compounded by the logistical barriers of recycling, greatly limits their recycling feasibility. Moreover, the minuscule quantities of other metals in the phone mean that it is more cost-effective to mine ore than to recycle phones. Collectively, the value from gold and other metals like copper and nickel is less than a dollar. Without groundbreaking advancements in recycling technology, smartphones are doomed to remain a largely untapped resource, piling up as future waste.

If we cannot recycle, it means more of consequences from digging in the ground. As the Krausmann et al. (2017) article above showed, when it comes to global material use, only 12% of new stock comes from recycled materials.

Recycling and the circular economy are not straightforward.

### 3 Global Climate vs. Geopolitical Realities

When I was trying to find an expert to come and talk to me and the students about rare earth elements, I remember talking to a professor of metallurgy

at a Norwegian university. He had been working at a Chinese university for a while, and so I thought he could be a good candidate. During our conversation, I realized that he had never considered the geopolitical aspects of the metals we were discussing. It was a big surprise at first, especially as he had been working in China as a Western metallurgy professor, but in the following months, I realized that this was quite normal. Moreover, even though I had developed my geopolitics model for years, I had not really bothered to go deeper into what critical raw materials really meant. They were in the model, but in my dematerialized unconsciousness, I did not pay much attention. These are, of course, examples of bounded rationality.

Today, I think both international officials and climate scientists working on global warming see the geopolitical side, and critical minerals have certainly become important in geopolitics and national security discourses. The two sides have different ultimate purposes: the climate side's purpose is to keep planet Earth liveable for human beings, while the geopolitical perspective, which is upheld by national security officials, is to keep their respective states safe. To combat climate change effectively, the world needs to cooperate and leave geopolitics and conflict aside, as UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and Executive Director of the IEA, Fatih Birol, have urged the world's leaders many times (United Nations, 2023, September 20; IEA, 2023, p. 4).

While the climate is global, geopolitics is mainly inter-national. International institutions rely on the support of member states. Sovereign states, especially the big powers, rely on themselves first and foremost and secondly on allied states. In times of insecurity for great powers, global warming is not the priority. These are our current times:

### **Climate:**

On August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2023, four Guardian journalists asked 45 leading climate scientists from around the world, "How bad is it, and how can we limit the damage?" They also asked if "... extreme weather was hitting people faster and harder than expected" (Carrington et al., 2023) in response to extreme weather records in 2023.

The scientists affirmed that the observed global heating was in line with decades of scientific forecasts, highlighting that this had been predicted in their models for years. Even with the shock from unprecedented sea temperatures and Antarctic ice loss, they claimed that the world had still not crossed a tipping point towards uncontrollable climate change. However, each degree of further warming would bring us closer to irreversible conse-

quences. They emphasized the urgent need for immediate action, meaning stopping fossil fuels. If not, the extreme weather of 2023 would become the new normal.

### **Geopolitics:**

As Rodrik and Walt (2022) point out, the rules-based liberal order that has been dominated by the United States and its allies is deteriorating before our eyes. We are experiencing the highest number of violent conflicts since the Second World War (United Nations Security Council (2023, January 26). The director of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the world's most important think tank on military armament, Dan Smith, said on June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2023, that "We are drifting into one of the most dangerous periods in human history" and that "It is imperative that the world's governments find ways to cooperate in order to calm geopolitical tensions, slow arms races and deal with the worsening consequences of environmental breakdown and rising world hunger" (SIPRI. 2023, June 12). And while we are experiencing the highest number of violent conflicts since the Second World War, tensions are brewing between the world's two greatest powers: the USA and China (see, for instance, Doyle (2023), Neumann (2024), or Leonard, (2021)). These countries are also major trading partners, so instead of complete decoupling, the US is weaponising Chinese access to certain technologies, while China weaponises its mineral supremacy, the latest being REEs in December 2023. The weaponisation of green metals like rare earths may also reduce the production of wind turbines and electric vehicles that are essential for the green shift. Moreover, the European Union may want to push Norway to get the Fen Complex up and running to have a secure supply chain.

### **How Chinese holistic thinking outsmarted the West**

As mentioned already, in the prologue, the Chinese strategy of gaining a monopoly in rare earth elements, similar to that of OPEC for oil, dates back to Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s or 90s. With the fall of the Soviet Union and China's opening up to the world, the dominating thought of the US hegemon was epitomized by Francis Fukuyama's article, "The End of History?", which argued that Marx was wrong and that "... the end point of mankind's ideological evolution ..." would be "... the universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (Fukuyama 1989, p. 1). Acknowledging its imperfections, this viewpoint

nonetheless proposed Western liberal democracy as the ‘least bad’ system of governance, superior to all known alternatives. The core ideas in Liberalism in international relations theory, as I understand them, include a focus on the positive role of international institutions, mutual interdependence through trade, and the democratic peace theory – which holds that democracies do not fight each other. Doyle (1983, p. 213) argues that liberal states form a “separate peace” among themselves but often behave aggressively toward non-liberal states.

The US, the undeniable hegemon for at least 20 years after the fall of the Soviet Union, acted on the aphorism “I am what I see, I see what I am,” believing that China was starting to view the world through the same liberal lenses. *They were wrong*. As Doyle warns, liberal states often misread non-liberal regimes, assuming they will naturally adopt liberal norms over time.

Concerning rare earths, which the US had been dominating for twenty years until the mid-1980s, there was no issue with China taking on this matter. In linear liberal thinking, this was just creating more interdependence, and the US could outsource the dirty mining and processing of REE and buy back end product. China was more than willing to take on mining and processing of different metals, even though it destroyed a lot of nature (Harrell, S. (2023) has written a great book on this). Obviously, economic development was more important than protecting nature. To hinder more famines, environmental destruction was a small price to pay; by the year 1998, “... China was finally able to feed itself” (Harrell, 2023, p. 231).

In 2001, China entered the World Trade Organization, and an increasingly globalized world kept trading, and China became richer. Until the oil crisis of 2010, when China held back REE exports. The Japanese immediately realized that interdependence could be weaponised and tried to develop an REE chain outside of China (Australia for mining and Malaysia for processing). The US took a few years longer to realize, and the EU has now finally awakened. What they had to realize, I think, is that the Chinese Communist Party has never had any intention of turning China into a liberal democracy.

Juan Chomon (2024, pp. 43–76) applies the board games chess and Go as metaphors for understanding how the Chinese state’s strategy is, and was, different from the US and EU. Western strategy often mirrors chess, where the focus is on direct confrontation and the elimination of opponents’ pieces to achieve checkmate. The rules are the same, it is played on an open board, and the pieces move in linear, stable patterns. This reflects an analytical approach, breaking down complex challenges into manageable

parts, focusing on individual components and their functions. The tactic of chess requires specific, calculated moves, symbolizing Western culture's preference for direct problem-solving and individualism.

In contrast, Chinese strategy resembles Go, emphasizing broad territorial control and the strategic encirclement of the opponent. Unlike chess, where all pieces are on the board from the start and move according to fixed rules, Go begins with an empty board. Players take turns placing their stones (one player with black stones and the other with white) on the intersections of the grid on the board.

The placement of stones happens gradually over the course of the game, with each move building on the previous ones. Players do not move stones after they are placed; instead, they lay down new stones one by one on each turn. This holistic approach values the interdependence of moves within the entire system, focusing on overall patterns and relationships rather than discrete battles. Go's roots in East Asian culture align with holistic thinking, valuing context, interdependence, and relational understanding (see also De Oliveira, S., & Nisbett, R. E., 2017, for more on the geography of thought).

This fundamental difference in strategic thinking, Chomon (2024, pp. 43–75) exemplifies with China's approach to dominating the rare earth elements (REE) market (see also Shen, Y., Moomy, & Eggert (2020). Since the late 1980s, China has been systematically working to secure a dominant position in the global REE supply chain, a calculated effort aimed at long-term control rather than short-term gains. This strategy started to take shape notably with China's acquisition of American Magnequench in 1995, which gave it methods of magnet technology. This was another move to control the complex journey of REEs from the mine to the magnet. The acquisition marked the beginning of China's near monopoly in the REE industry, controlling critical stages from processing raw materials to producing advanced magnets essential for modern technology. But China's strategy didn't stop at technological dominance. Utilizing its WTO status and the global market dynamics, China has masterfully manipulated the REE market to discourage competition in refining and alloying, even paying a premium for REE concentrates to deter other countries from developing their supply chains downstream. Moreover, while China now has scale, competitors like NEO, the rare earth separation plant in Estonia, do not get access to modern Chinese gear and still must use their old equipment.

This Go-like strategy of encircling the market has allowed China to not just dominate the REE sector but also become a significant player in green technology: China controls most of the supply chains of green metals in



general, from owning mines across the world through processing and development into final products in China. If a business moves production to China, it will get access to cheaper metals. If it does not, it will face competition from companies that have a cost advantage. China now dominates a lot of green end products, like wind turbines, electric vehicles, and solar panels (Chomon, 2024, pp. 43–76).

In essence, while the West may often opt for direct, chess-like strategies focusing on immediate threats, China's approach in the metals sector is more reminiscent of Go, emphasizing strategic positioning and long-term territorial gain. This holistic strategy has enabled China to become a processing giant, particularly when it comes to green minerals.

In the last few years, we have seen the US changing strategy by introducing the CHIPS Act (White House, 2022, August 9) and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) (White House, 2023, August 16). The US may have started its process of de-risking from China. The CHIPS Act is intended to keep Western technology from Chinese hands (Western, because the US also put pressure on Japan for some input technology and the Netherlands to stop their company ASML from exporting advanced semiconductor lithography equipment to China), in particular, semiconductor technology. The IRA aims to support American supply chains for the green transition by providing subsidies, including to MP Materials, which owns the Mountain Pass mine, to create a complete supply chain from mining to magnet production. However, this could pose challenges because the company has a Chinese shareholder, Shenghe Resources, holding a 7.7% stake in MP Materials' stock (Zorpette, 2024). Shenghe might seek to prevent MP Materials from developing downstream processing capabilities in the US, as Mountain Pass currently supplies rare earth materials for refining in China, helping to preserve China's monopoly on rare earth processing and refining.

The change of industrial strategy in the US, which included restricting Chinese access to semiconductor technology, did not go unnoticed in China, which responded by stopping exports of critical semiconductor materials like germanium and gallium (Nguyen & Onstad, 2023). Furthermore, they are now tightening their exports of the key battery anode material graphite, which they also dominate. This is part of an escalating trade war between China and the US, which recently prohibited exports of even more microchip types from producer Nvidia (Economist, 2023). On December 21, 2023, China imposed export restrictions on REE equipment and prohibited Chinese REE experts from cooperating with foreigners (Nguyen

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the dominant liberal Western approach to international relations, rooted in interdependence and global institutions, has increasingly given way to geopolitics, autarchy, and zero-sum thinking. International bodies like the WTO struggle to mediate, much like the UN Security Council, which is paralyzed by veto powers such as Russia and the USA. Mutual, complex interdependence is no longer seen as a strength; rather, it is a vulnerability that might be weaponised (Farrell & Newman, 2019). The most powerful actors in the world today are states, and their first concern is national security; this takes precedence over climate change.

### **Impact on Europe: Geopolitics and the Green Shift**

Recently, the director of the National Security Authority (Hesla, 2023), a researcher in the Norwegian military, and one of Norway's foremost recognized experts on geopolitics (Hellestveit, 2022, pp. 168–169), have all stated that Norway is unprepared for the new geopolitical realities of the current international situation. “We do not have it in our backbone that things can go terribly wrong on a large scale,” war researcher Tor Ivar Strømmen told the Norwegian broadcasting network (NRK). “He believes that politicians lack an understanding of the threats Norway is facing” (Brembo, 2023). Hellestveit argues that one key reason for this unpreparedness is that Norway has experienced a period of *deep peace*.

It seems our authorities have thought that war in Europe, or particularly in Norway, is unthinkable. With Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Western Europe and Norway are starting to wake up. Defence and security are becoming concrete things for Norwegians again because we recognize that war is a real possibility. Like the rest of the world, Norway is increasing its military spending.

The EU needs both green minerals and defence-critical materials. Norway possesses significant mineral resources beyond rare earth elements, many of which are of strategic interest to the EU. The Fen Complex may hold the largest REE resources in Europe, but other mining projects across the country are also being explored. In the material reflection, I have shown that material extraction, waste disposal, and the development of green end products – such as wind farms or an expanded electric grid – have already met significant opposition. Likewise, mining companies seeking to start operations in multiple locations across Norway are facing strong resistance.

Both the EU and the US are working to de-risk their supply chains from China, but this transition faces strong opposition from stakeholders such as indigenous groups, environmental organizations, and local communities. Norway has the potential to become a key supplier of green minerals for the EU, just as the EU is becoming increasingly important for Norway amid rising geopolitical and geoeconomic tensions.

For decades, Norway has largely lived in an abstract world where security and material needs – whether for defence or the green transition – were taken care of elsewhere in the global supply chain. But as geopolitical tensions disrupt global trade and supply chains, Norway is being pulled back into the real world, where we can no longer just reap the benefits while others bear the costs. In much of the world, people have long understood that production comes with material consequences – now, Norway is beginning to experience this reality as well. If we are to face both geopolitical and climate realities, we must recognize that the extraction and processing of raw materials cannot always happen “somewhere else”.

#### **4 International collaborations in higher education**

I should start by emphasizing that most of this article is a result of this experience with international collaboration. In itself, that is evidence of impact from getting hands-on, practical knowledge in-depth. And because I did not travel abroad but instead brought an international expert to the campus in Norway, I think the effect was broader.

Internationalization should not be only for the few who can travel abroad. As the Norwegian government has stated, high-quality education depends on international cooperation, and the government wants internationalization to increase (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2020). However, internationalization must be more than just exposure to foreign people or languages – it must serve a clear educational purpose (Beelen & Jones, 2015). This is where Internationalization at Home (IaH) becomes important. Beelen & Jones (2015, p. 69) define Internationalization at Home as:

*“... the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments.”*

This collaboration exemplifies why internationalization should not be limited to mobility programmes. Bringing an international expert into the classroom provided deeper, practical engagement with global challenges.

through a deep dive into some tiny elements from the periodic table. Instead of students passively receiving theoretical knowledge, they interacted with someone who could answer concretely with hands-on experience about most aspects of a very specific topic (Lindseth, 2020, p. 82). We experienced the opposite of approximation.

Moreover, the impact extended beyond the classroom. Lindseth (2020, p. 83) describes how discrepancies between expectations and reality lead to reflection and new directions. Concerning this topic, we had many, for instance, the difficulty of recycling REEs. For me, it led to looking into other recycling problems that I had not thought about. Plastic is an example of something that is barely recycled.

The collaboration with O'Brock unexpectedly led to interdisciplinary research engagement (Fensfeltet), illustrating how international cooperation can reshape academic structures.

This experience shows that IaH is not just an alternative to exchange programmes; it can be a catalyst for long-term academic collaboration, research initiatives, and systemic thinking.

## Meta Hodos

I will end this essay with a reflection on my journey instead – what Lindseth (2020, pp. 95–99) calls *meta-hodos*, how knowledge evolves through movement and reflection. This path started with me trying to figure out what was so peculiar about rare earth elements. I wanted to understand them better to improve my geopolitics model. I would never have imagined that this tiny question would lead me into so many fascinating and complex issues.

What stands out from the concrete reflection is how lucky I was to come across someone with deep practical expertise from the real world of rare earth elements. That encouraged me to go further and deeper into areas of knowledge I would not have considered before. As Lindseth (2020, p. 82) points out, knowledge gains responsiveness (*svarevne*) when it is tested in real-world contexts, allowing it to connect with complexity rather than remain abstract and approximate. O'Brock's expertise was not just theoretical; it responded to real dilemmas and deepened my understanding in a way that purely academic sources could not. Moreover, that deeper understanding of REEs allowed me to see connections in many different directions across disciplines.

What I call rematerialisation, which of course came to me as I realized how disconnected, or dematerialized, I was, changed the way I see my surroundings. This shift is in line with Lindseth's (2020, p. 83) idea that discrepancies between what we assume and what we encounter in reality can lead to deeper reflection.

Especially since I drive to play squash several nights a week, material maintenance had been right before my eyes for years without me paying attention. Suddenly, I started to notice how often the roads were maintained and how often my local tunnel was closed at night for the same reason.

The theoretical reflection on geopolitics and climate change became a lot longer than I had imagined. When I realized that one reason China could gradually capture the REE monopoly was due to its holistic, Go-like strategic thinking, compared to the more linear, chess-like approach of the Americans, my understanding expanded. I see now that many systems interact and that REEs and their supply chains provide a good entry point for understanding many of them. My way into systems thinking has been through this extensive deep dive into REEs.

This has affected my teaching and my research, and to my surprise, also many of my colleagues from many different disciplinary backgrounds, who are now part of our research group on minerals and REEs. A PhD student has even joined the group, with a project on mining and the rights of indigenous people.

Finally, I will refer to an article that connects to many of the writings in this paper. One of the authors is Johan Rockström, whom I mainly knew as a climate scientist famous for developing the planetary boundaries concept (Rockström et al., 2009). In early 2024, he published an article with Lawrence et al. (2024) titled "Global Polycrisis: The Causal Mechanisms of Crisis Entanglement". The abstract is as follows:

*The term "polycrisis" appears with growing frequency to capture the interconnections between global crises, but the word lacks substantive content. In this article, we convert it from an empty buzzword into a conceptual framework and research program that enables us to better understand the causal linkages between contemporary crises. We draw upon the intersection of climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, and Russia's war in Ukraine to illustrate these causal interconnections and explore key features of the world's present polycrisis. (Lawrence et al., 2024)*

## Postscript:

In April 2025, President Trump escalated the tariff war with China. The Chinese response revealed the power of controlling the rare earth supply chain.

In addition to tariffs on American goods, China imposed export licensing requirements on seven medium and heavy rare earth elements – samarium, gadolinium, terbium, dysprosium, lutetium, scandium, and yttrium – along with their compounds, oxides, alloys, mixtures, and products (Jin et al., 2025)

This was no coincidence. The only U.S. rare earth mine, Mountain Pass, mainly produces light rare earths, while these seven are the hardest to replace. For a neodymium magnet to stay magnetic above 80–150 °C (Curie temperature), it must be doped with the heavy rare earth dysprosium (Constantinides, 2017)

Samarium, meanwhile, is vital in military equipment that requires magnets to maintain magnetism at even higher temperatures (Bradsher, 2025).

The measures triggered a crisis and “full panic” among car manufacturers outside China that rely on such magnets for braking and steering systems as well as electric motors (Amann, Carey et al., 2025).

The military, even more dependent on rare earths (drones, missiles, submarines, jets, robotics), was next (Emont, Somerville & MacDonald, 2025). In July, the Pentagon invested \$400 million in MP Materials, owner of the only U.S. rare earth mine. Yet even if MP manages to refine ore all the way into magnets, it will still need dysprosium (Sanderson, 2025).

Greenland may offer a long-term answer. As of October 2025, the Tanbreeze project in southern Greenland has heavy rare earths and is majority-owned by U.S. company Critical Metals Corp, and the U.S. government is considering taking a stake (Mining.com, 2025).

After months of escalating tension and mounting export controls, the situation reached a new turning point this morning, 9. October 2025, just as this essay goes to print: China announced sweeping new export controls on rare earths.

The new directive will require licenses not only for raw materials but also for any foreign-made magnets and semiconductor components containing even 0.1% Chinese-origin heavy rare earths.

China’s commerce ministry said the new measures were intended to “protect its national security and interests” and prevent the “misuse of rare earth materials in military and other sensitive sectors.” The ministry

added that it had found some overseas companies had significantly harmed China's security by transferring Chinese-origin rare-earth materials and technology to others for military use.

China's commerce ministry said the rules would be phased in from December 2025, with most export licenses for military users to be denied and exports to semiconductor manufacturers reviewed case-by-case.

"The timing of this new policy is strategic," said Gracelin Baskaran, a critical minerals expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. And added that the move is a clear effort to hinder the development of industrial base capabilities in the United States and its allies, while also seeking to prevent the "leakage of technical capabilities" from Chinese firms to foreign counterparts (McMorrow. 2025).

The months since April 2025 have confirmed Deng Xiaoping's quip: "*The Middle East has its oil; China has rare earths.*" Rare earths have never been more critical (Allison, 2025).

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> (Scheyder, 2024, p. 106, quotes the Molycorp CEO Mark Smith in 2010 complaining to the US Congress that his company had seventeen scientists competing against six thousand Chinese rare earth-focused scientists).

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## CHAPTER 14: EXISTENTIAL ENCOUNTERS – EPISTEMOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

Kristin Gregers Eriksen<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract:**

*This chapter starts from a self-altering experience as an international visiting researcher witnessing a Blackfoot First Nations Sundance ceremony in Turtle Island, 2019. I discuss my learnings in dialogue with indigenous, decolonial, and pluriversal approaches to knowledge. The overarching aim with this theoretical-philosophical reflection is to explore the potentials of internationalization in education as an avenue towards co-creation of new paradigms that may open not-yet-imaginable possibilities for sustainable futures. I discuss three main insights that derived from my analysis of the experience, hereunder epistemic blindness, border thinking, and the significance of acknowledging the ontological level when approaching the challenges of modern/colonial unsustainability. Towards the end, I suggest potential openings for pathways towards equitable and ethical approaches to internationalization.*

### **Keywords:**

*higher education, internationalization, decolonial, indigenous knowledges, sustainability*

### **The experience, Part 1: Sundance 2019**

As a visiting researcher to the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, in Turtle Island and what is currently known as Canada, I was an observer of an interdisciplinary undergraduate course on critical and indigenous approaches to sustainability and land and food systems. During the course, students and teachers were invited to witness and take part in a First Nations' ceremony centring the land and relational practices, emphasizing the existential dimension of sustainability. The ceremony took place in the land

of the Blood Tribe, part of the Blackfoot confederacy, residing within the south-western parts of Canada and north-western parts of what is currently known as the USA. The ceremony, Sundance, is an annual tradition of reaffirming and celebrating spiritual beliefs and relations between human beings, the land, and the universe. With the instalment of the Indian Acts, referring to the policies of colonization passed from the Canadian government towards First Nations, such ceremonies were banned (formally, this amendment to the Indian Act was in place from 1895 to 1951). Although it could result in a prison sentence and fines, some would continue their ceremonies as acts of resistance (Pratt, 2019, p. 31). In recent times, several communities have revitalized the ceremony. In this particular community, the chief received a vision that gestured him to include people coming from all four directions<sup>2</sup> in the celebrations. This way, our university group was gifted an invitation to participate.

As a group of university students and lecturers, we stayed on the land and witnessed ceremonies that lasted a little over a week. There was no contact with the outside world or use of screens or phones during the duration of our stay, other than visiting the local village for food supplies. The days started with singing and drumming at sunset, continued with smudging and sacred dancing during the day, and were accompanied by healing and relational practices such as sweat lodges and pipe-smoking circles. The practices were focused on being together, and on experiencing and taking part in relations with each other, the land, and the universe. For the community members who participated in sacred dances, bodily and personal sacrifice performances, such as piercings of the flesh, were a key part of the ceremonies. As a highly international but predominantly non-indigenous group, our roles as visitors were as respectful observers and helpers. Our contributions were related to preparing food, managing waste, gathering sage for smudging, participating in singing and drumming when invited, and contributing in any way we could. The symbolic significance of this was related to reflecting upon how colonial structures create extractive relations where some (and notably indigenous communities) are doing the dirty work, as a metaphor for carrying the heaviest burdens and costs of coloniality, modernity and climate change. The visit thus also represented a symbolic act of giving back to the community as a way of healing colonial relations.

## The experience, Part 2: Epilogue

The significance of my experience with the Sundance is not only related to what took place during the ceremonies, but also what happened after. The stated aim of the academic course that witnessing the ceremonies was part of was to “create land-based and existential learning experiences that can open different possibilities to imagine sustainability”. Although the experiences were the core of the course content, students had to fulfil a formal exam in the shape of an academic reflexive essay for the university to acknowledge their experiences as learning in the form of university credits. Some of the students expressed their frustration with not really finding the clear connection between their experiences and the requirements of the academic format.

As a teacher educator and heavily entrenched within a Western-dominated academic culture and habitus, I was also urged to translate my experiences from the ceremonies into words, or something semiotically accessible. I found myself altered, and that something had shifted in my understanding of sustainability and my relation to the earth and fellow humans, but it was hard to explain exactly what and how this was. As I tried to explain my insights to colleagues back home in my university, it somehow appeared naïve or insignificant; the words could not contain its full meaning. It appeared impossible to communicate to colleagues, even as they were interested and showed engagement with my sharing. I felt lonesome in the encounters with people who did not share the same embodied experience with me. I searched back to my fellow participants from the ceremony to sit with them and share our collective memory of the experience. Somehow, I had the notion that I had received a fundamental teaching, but it did not seem to hold value as learning or insight in the languages and formats of the university, and I was not able to communicate it to my colleagues in the way I wanted. This must not be understood as implying alleged inabilities or lack of will to understand from my colleagues, but rather about my own experience with lack of tools for explaining and sharing properly. It should rather be understood in relation to the structures of knowledge and validation we are socialized into through Western academia, as I will elaborate more on below. Even in a friendly and welcoming atmosphere, the feeling I was left with was the clear sense that the knowledge that I so clearly perceived as self-altering in its original context somehow appeared invisible as transferred to a different context.



## What is at stake?

Global citizenship education and internationalization of higher education are commonly suggested as pathways towards addressing our current challenges of social injustice, climate change and ecological crisis, not least with the launch of the *United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4.7* on quality education (UN, 2022). An underlying premise of such policy efforts is the conceptualization of education as potentially transformative, holding the ability to create social, political, and ecological change towards sustainable futures (Pashby & Andreotti, 2016). However, there are growing concerns about internationalization becoming instrumentalised and thwarted by neoliberal, capitalist, and colonial interests that are fundamentally unsustainable (Brandenburg & de Wit, 2011; Pais & Costa, 2020; Stein, 2021). Stein (2017) upholds that the problem with current efforts towards internationalization in higher education is related to how these imperatives are constructed within the same modern-colonial frameworks that are the actual genesis of the problems of (un)sustainability that they allegedly are set out to solve. This particularly concerns epistemological ignorance and monocultures in research and academia, reproducing coloniality and Eurocentric dominance by projecting Western and Eurocentric approaches to knowledge as hegemonic, universal, and superior (Kuokkanen, 2008; Spivak, 1994).

What was at stake in my experience during and after the Sundance was represented by feelings of both doom and hope in relation to the potential of internationalization and education in alleviating current challenges. The visit entailed a clear experience of encountering sustainability in a different and new way. I was somehow able to see the edges and limitations of the vision of sustainable futures I am socialized into from my training in Eurocentric academia more clearly, spurring a sense of sorrow in the failed promises of the modern society and a dystopic presence. At the same time, I also felt the emergence of radical hope in the community with the people and the land experienced in and through the visit. In the following, I choose to further explore this path of lingering hope and possibility, reflecting upon the question:

*How can internationalization contribute to higher education's efforts towards enabling sustainable futures?*

The overarching aim of the coming theoretical-philosophical reflection is to explore the potentials of internationalization in education as an avenue towards the co-creation of new paradigms that may open not yet

imaginable possibilities for sustainable futures. Although an explicit aim is to provide critical interruptions to naturalized ways of thinking about internationalization of higher education, the goal is not to dismiss the value of these efforts as such. I argue that internationalization may provide valuable spaces for existential encounters that hold unique potentials for pluralizing epistemologies needed for the global human community to gesture towards sustainable futures. Notably, such encounters represent the potential for *border thinking* (Anzaldúa, 1987; Mignolo, 2000), an epistemic response from the subalterns, or the borders, that spurs pathways to transforming hegemonic ways of thinking. Focusing on the role of pedagogy and epistemology for understanding transformative education, there is a risk of concealing the material and economic structures of coloniality framing the potentials for social and ecological justice and change (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Towards the end, I approach this challenge by suggesting the notions of epistemic justice and the North Sámi concept of *verdevuohtta*, or friendship (Finbog, 2022), as visions for a more equitable and ethical approach to internationalization.<sup>3</sup>

## Methodology and analytic approach

The methodological approach in this chapter is inspired by *reflective practice research*, where the goal is to deepen one's understanding of experience and practice to develop practical wisdom, such as, for example as a teacher educator (Biesta, 2014; Weiss, 2021). Reflective practice research is recognized by the inseparability of knowing and doing, or theoretical and experience-based knowledge, which in the pre-modern Western epistemological tradition was described by Aristotle as *phronesis* (Weiss, 2021). The inseparability of knowledge as an entity and practice is a key common feature of indigenous epistemological paradigms (Wilson, 2008; Prete, 2019). Within an indigenous paradigm, it is also vital that epistemology is inseparable from ontology, entailing that ways of knowing are interrelated with ways of being. Moreover, knowledge and learning are considered relational rather than individual possessions (Prete, 2019). In my methodological approach, I build on insights from both what, in simplified terms, would be described as Western-based epistemological theory and decolonial and indigenous perspectives and methodologies. Recognizing the differences in worldviews, and notably that indigenous research methodology is not a perspective to be added but rather a paradigm (Wilson, 2008), I also underline

how I, as a researcher, am positioned in a cultural interface (Nakata, 2007) that represents a dynamic moving between positionalities and perspectives (Eriksen, 2022).

I realize the potential risks of applying “Western/Eurocentric” and “Decolonial/Indigenous” as potentially essentialised and binary concepts. However, they must be understood here as strategic analytical tools serving the aim of enabling critique. When referring to the Western-modern hegemonic norms and culture of the university, I am applying the understanding described in Finbog (2022, p. 4) not as a particular location or social group, but rather as a collective philosophical, moral, and scientific doctrine that is widely accepted as being the dominant collective discourse of knowledge. The intention with this construction is not to disqualify the relative diversity of knowledges derived from the Western world, but rather to critique the positioning of the Western, Eurocentric traditions as allegedly universal (cf. Andreotti, 2011). As Kuokkanen (2005) points out, centring indigenous perspectives in the academy and education is about redefining Eurocentric hegemony as to concepts such as research, science, and, most recently, humanities. This is not reserved for indigenous philosophies or thinkers, of course, but is rather part of a diverse group of critical resistance to dogmatic and unjust appropriation in the university, “opening up to forces from without” (cf. Derrida, 2001, p. 235; Kuokkanen, 2005, p. 20ff).

The purpose of this chapter is to stimulate new, critical conversations in the field of internationalization of higher education by paying explicit attention to perspectives often excluded from the discussion. In this paper, I choose to centre indigenous perspectives, paying respect to the context of my experience with the Sundance, as well as my own positionality. I, like many others who today consider themselves Norwegian, have Sámi ancestry, and it therefore appears as “close to home” for me to refer to concepts from a Sámi ontology. I also acknowledge the difficulties, risks, and limitations of applying Western terminology to address indigenous ways of knowing, but ground my approach within what Kovach (2009) describes as “strategic concession”, claiming space for alternative epistemologies in a not always welcoming, albeit powerful, academy.

## **Theoretical reflection**

In the following I further explore and analyse my experience with and after the Sundance through lenses from decolonial (cf. Eriksen, 2021; Mignolo

& Walsh, 2018) and indigenous philosophies, notably from the Blackfoot confederacy, located in south-western Canada and northern Montana, US (Prete, 2019), and from Sámi contexts (Finbog, 2022; Fjellheim, 2023a, 2023b; Kuokkanen, 2005, 2008). As an approach to epistemology, decoloniality is not really a theoretical position, referring to a fixed standpoint or a predefined or final truth. Rather, decoloniality can be understood both as analysis and critique as well as a stance and praxis signified by resisting the modern-Western idea of the universality of epistemology (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

In my further reading, I discuss three themes that derive from the experience: the encounter with epistemic blindness, border thinking, and the meeting between knowledge systems, and the significance of acknowledging the ontological level when approaching the challenges of modern/colonial unsustainability.

## **Epistemic ignorance**

Engaging with decolonial and indigenous literature makes it clear how the experience of being invisible when trying to communicate the experiences within the frameworks of the Western academy is long known to and previously thoroughly explained by colonized and indigenous peoples. As Kuokkanen (2008) maintains, the university as an institution is characterized by a prevalent epistemic ignorance, referring to how academic structures, practices, and discourses enable reproduction of Western hegemony in defining epistemic norms and traditions. This also concerns the disqualification of affective and embodied knowledges as part of what is conceived as rationality, based on the naturalization of Cartesian dualism (Alcoff, 2007). Practical, first-person, experiential, and embodied knowledge of all sorts was discredited by modern Western epistemology and relegated to the sphere of culture, tradition, and myth. The systems of validation of knowledge and “truth” in the academy depend rather upon it being transformed into propositional knowledge that can be rendered fully in linguistic form. Hence, it was difficult or even impossible to translate my experiences into something of this format that can be recognized as knowledge by my peers, or even myself, being socialized into the modern Western understanding of epistemology. This was also at stake for the students, writing their essays to obtain credits; somehow, this system of validation was incapable of acknowledging their existential learning. I have grown up and

been socialized into a positionality as a majority white European and am simply not used to being confronted with this invisibilization. It is rarely something I embody. Living the realities of this through my experience, therefore, made me alter through the struggle of understanding, in Todd to understand, in Todd's (2003) description of learning.

Importantly, the epistemic ignorance that I was confronted with cannot be understood as a simple case of "not knowing" or mere lack of understanding. It is also entrenched in a system of practices and structures that actively foreclose other than dominant epistemologies and refuse to contemplate their existence (Fjellheim, 2023b; Kuokkanen, 2008, p. 63). Hence, the ignorance is sanctioned (Spivak, 1999), meaning that it is actively upheld by dominant power structures serving the reproduction of coloniality of knowledge. As Quijano (2000) argues, European colonialism did not end with historical colonialism based on territorial occupation; rather, enduring power and knowledge structures, described as the coloniality of power (shorthand: coloniality), were installed. The European hegemony concentrated all forms of control, including the production of knowledge. Coloniality of knowledge amounts to "a full dependence of the models of thinking, making, and interpreting the world based on the norms created and imposed by/in Western modernity" (Tlostanova et al., 2019, p. 290). In the same vein, alternative, traditional, and local modes of knowledge production are erased, and the university creates a monoculture that is in reality as particular as all other epistemologies but that projects itself as universal and delocalised.

What is at stake in the frustration experienced both by me in conversations with peers and the students trying to convey their knowledge in the academic, written format is the forcing of translating experiences into a system of validation developed for other forms of knowing. On a deeper level, this is not simply a conflict only of the epistemological kind but also has an ontological dimension. As the systems of validation in the Western academy are based on an ontology of separability and representability that creates an alleged separation between the subject and the object, an indigenous and embodied way of knowing is grounded in a holistic ontology where the knower and the known are part of the same process. What this also informs is the limitations of the Western academy in realizing the diversity of knowledges. I know what I know from my experience because I practiced it – I embody it. And what it also tells us is that the content, the ways of thinking, will not change without structural and material change,

such as how academia is organized, how knowledge is validated, and who defines these norms.

### **Border thinking and the encounters of knowledge systems**

As described above, the inability for me to translate my learnings into a form of knowledge to be validated in the university was also a case of the meeting of different epistemologies. This existential encounter with the structures and boundaries framing knowledge and “truth” has, in the decolonial tradition, been described as “border thinking” (Anzaldúa, 1987; Mignolo, 2000). Border thinking must, however, not be understood in terms of a mere clash of cultures or perspectives. As Mignolo upholds, border thinking occurs wherever the conditions are appropriate and the awareness of coloniality comes into being (2011, p. 276).

Border thinking is thinking from the “outside”, using alternative knowledge traditions and languages and modalities of expression. It is thus simply not what happens when Western epistemology and “other” knowledge systems meet. It is rather the introduction of alternative epistemologies and ontologies into the hegemonic discourses of Western modernity so that the framers and borders that restrain knowledge and knowing are rendered visible. It makes us see what does not gain space and validation within the dominating conventions of knowledge and truth. In my experience, the encounter with alternative forms of knowledge through a Western-modern lens of knowledge validation also led to an encounter with the limitations of this system in what knowledges can or cannot be understood from this perspective. In such an encounter, then, where one is exposed to “multiple realities”, the hegemony of Western knowledge can be relativised, making space for destabilization and the pluralizing of knowledges (Andreotti et al., 2011). As the decolonial perspective on knowledge upholds the inseparability of knowledge with context and praxis, the actual visit to the place (in my example, the reserve where the Sundance took place) was key for the occurrence of border thinking. This is an argument for internationalization in education as an avenue towards enabling border thinking, in creating mobility between different epistemological contexts understood as geographical places.

Border thinking does not have a representational aim or an object that it wants to “get right”, but rather the focus is on the field or episteme that it wants to transform, complexifying and diversifying the possibilities of

evaluation across differences (Alcoff, 2007, p. 97). It is from the margins of the colonality of power that “critical border thinking” emerges as a critique gesturing towards a pluriversal (Mignolo, 2000) transmodern world of multiple and diverse ethico-political projects of horizontal dialogues and communication. However, to achieve pluriversality of knowledges, it is fundamental to transform the concrete material structures and systems of domination and exploitation of the present colonial power matrix. Epistemic ignorance is not only a lack of understanding but also refers to practices and discourses that actively foreclose other than dominant epistemologies through the working of power and hegemony (Kuokkanen, 2008). Decolonization is not situated in the mind, as a sort of “free your mind and the rest will follow”, but rather positioned in the particularities of colonality and its structures (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 19).

In my example, this is at stake in the systems of validation of the students’ learnings. For the experiences to be acknowledged as actual learning, they must be validated through the format of a graded text. As a teacher educator, this has made me contemplate the inbuilt limitations of the validation and grading systems in the university and how they, at times, may serve to exclude and disqualify knowledges, in spite of other intentions. For alternative knowledge systems to gain a space in academia, it is not sufficient to try and translate. This serves what Spivak calls Eurocentric arrogance of conscience (1999, p. 171), the assumption that with sufficient information, one can “understand” the other. A significant part of the teachings I received through the experience at the Sundance was exactly that there are things I may not fully understand, but I can still choose to witness and acknowledge. However, within the academic structures, the space for such knowledges is dependent upon the university to reorient and expand paradigms and strategies of welcoming and validation (Kuokkanen, 2008).

### **Acknowledging ontological foreclosures**

Having accounted for the issues related to the perceived inability to communicate and validate the learnings within the norms of Western academia, I am still finding myself returning to the question of *what these learnings were*. What were the insights and learnings concerning my understanding of sustainability?

The significance of opposing epistemic ignorance, enabling border thinking, and making way for a pluriversality of knowledges is interre-

lated with our current predicament concerning climate change and ecological crisis. Several critiques of the global sustainable development discourse have argued its shortcomings as orienting educational horizons of hope and change, as it is grounded in the same colonial systems and logics of exploitation, separability and perpetual growth that caused the crisis (Davis & Todd, 2017; Stein et al., 2023; Whyte, 2019). There is also an increasing acknowledgement that local, traditional, and indigenous knowledges hold value in terms of sustaining healthy relationships between human beings and the earth. The emphasis on alternative knowledge systems, and particularly indigenous knowledges, is further manifested by global policy developments on matters concerning sustainability. The UN Biodiversity Agreement, written in Montreal, December 2022 (COP15, 2022), amounted to a historical recognition of traditional knowledge as an important factor contributing to conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. The agreement underlines how traditional knowledge and indigenous people's presence are vital when protecting and restoring nature and biodiversity.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the International Panel of Climate Change (IPCC) has acknowledged the imperative of considering indigenous knowledges as a vital part of the knowledge base concerning climate change mitigation.

On a different level, my experiences also gifted me a teaching about the limitations of knowing as such. I had the very clear sensation that in being together during the ceremony and experiencing the relations with each other and the land, the insights into sustainability were not mainly *known* but rather *experienced*. This way of understanding knowledge not simply as an object but as a practice, is very well described within Blackfoot pedagogy. In accordance with Blackfoot ontology, pedagogy is more than learning; it is about a way of living, being, and learning, where what is to be learned is united with how it is learned (Prete, 2019, p. 35). Knowledge is transferred through practice and relationships. Knowledge, or rather knowing as practice, is not an entity out there to be obtained as an object by the individual knower but is practiced and is entrenched in relation to place and people.

However, on a related level, the experience also opened my understanding to the limitations of knowing as such. As argued by Stein et al. (2023), climate change and the related crisis of our times are rooted not mainly in lack of knowledge, but rather in foreclosures and socially sanctioned disavowals; fantasies and desires stemming from the continuous investment in inherently unsustainable modern-colonial habits of being. The consequence of this is hence that the changes that need to happen for gesturing



towards more sustainable futures are not mainly occurring on the epistemological level: there is not simply a need for new and better knowledge, but rather different ways of being human in the world and in relation to the earth. What we need is an ontological critique of modernity/coloniality that proposes the interruption of modes of existence that are grounded on human exceptionalism, exaltation, and entitlements, rather than an expansion of those. The question thus becomes not what knowledge can help education reorient towards supporting sustainable development, but rather *what kind of learning and educational practices could prepare people to face the impossibility of sustaining our contemporary modern-colonial habits of being?* (Stein et al., 2023, p. 275).

### **Experimenting with different visions for internationalization of higher education: Cognitive justice and *verddevuolta***

As pointed out by Bauman (2000), “There is a widening gap between the kinds of challenges modern education was designed to address, and the challenges we face in today’s uncertain, complex, and rapidly changing world. [...] The present educational crisis is first and foremost the crisis of inherited institutions and philosophies, which are meant for a different kind of reality” (Bauman, 2000, p. 31 in Stein, 2017, p. 3). This is particularly pressing when looking at sustainability, where our overwhelmingly clear knowledge about the current crisis does not seem to move towards sustainable change and transformations of our ways of being in and with the world.

As I have argued above, one avenue towards sustainability is the decolonization of Western modern hegemony in defining and validating knowledge. This is not a case of disqualifying Western science and epistemology, but rather of relativising its alleged universality through border thinking, making space for a greater pluriversity of knowledges. Learning from the First Nations’ vision of the four directions and the medicine wheel as a metaphor for epistemological pluralism, we can envision the four directions each as significant for

looking at something in the centre that humans are trying to know ... The idea of moving around to look from a different perspective, from the north, the south, the east and the west, and from above, below or within, is contained in the creative process... Indigenous logics moves between relationships, re-

visiting, moving to where it is necessary to learn or to bring understandings together (Cajete, 2000, pp. 210–211 in Andreotti et al., 2011, p. 47).

As indigenous ontologies teach us that knowledges are situated, contextual, relational, and practiced, the border thinking and pluralization of horizons of knowing are also somehow dependent upon encounters and movement, making a clear argument for the value of internationalization. This is not to say that internationalization of higher education can continue as a practice of unsustainable mobility of people flying across the globe, but that the encounters between people and contexts can be key to sustainable futures. This is especially so for approaching and seeing the limitations of Western epistemologies. Acknowledging that learning from local, traditional, and indigenous knowledge systems may be especially important for approaching sustainability, this runs a high risk of the encounters being thwarted by coloniality and turned into extractivism and appropriations that serve the reproduction of Western, white imperialism. We know far too well that indigenous peoples' rights to land and sustenance of cultures are continuously violated in different contexts across the globe in the names of the Anthropocene and green colonialism (Davis & Todd, 2017; Fjellheim, 2023a). Consider this statement in UNESCO's statement on the role of education and so-called "21<sup>st</sup>-century skills" for enabling sustainable futures:

Alternative knowledge systems need to be recognized and properly accounted for, rather than relegated to an inferior status. Societies everywhere can learn a great deal from each other by being more open to the discovery and understanding of other worldviews. There is much to learn, for instance, from rural societies across the world, particularly indigenous ones, about the relationship of human society to the natural environment. (UNESCO, 2015, p. 30)

This is, on one side, presented as an acknowledgement of indigenous knowledges. However, it is also stated that "there is much to learn . . ." from these knowledges. The phrasing illustrates the risk of collapsing the understanding of the plurality of knowledges into a case of different cultures or perspectives, not challenging the position of Western science and epistemology as the norm. If not approached through considerations for epistemic justice, such a well-intended statement risks the reproduction of hegemony through the positioning of an "us" who are to learn from "them", representing "other cultures" (Kuokkanen, 2008; see also Helskog and Weiss,

For enabling frameworks for imagining more ethical, equitable, and healthy relations and gesturing towards epistemic justice, I learn from Sámi scholar Finbog (2022) and suggest the North Sámi concept of *verddevuohta*, translated as ‘reciprocity through hospitality and friendship’, as an imaginary horizon. This notion entails a vision of the self-in-relation common to indigenous ontologies. In times past, *verddevuohta* in Sápmi was a relationship and system of trading of goods and services between Sámi communities, or *siidas*, and people. The different parties were *verdde* to each other, and as Finbog (2022) describes, “the essence of *verddevuohta* was similar in that it designates an ecosystem founded on the relational qualities of a Sámi ontology [...] it is the meeting of equal partners that work together to achieve something” (p.99). *Verdde* then describes a relation of mutual respect, responsibility, reciprocity, and commitment, which I argue is imperative for ethical practice of internationalization in and through higher education.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> In the medicine wheel in First Nations’ cultures, the World is seen as having four directions: Black (West), Red (North), Yellow (East) and White (South). This is part of a holistic ontology, and the four directions must not be understood as merely geographical concepts. The number four is an expression of balance and harmony inherently present and contained within, and the directions hold great (context-specific and diverse) meanings and significance in a variety of aspects such as nature/human relations, health, well-being, community, and spiritual balance.

<sup>3</sup> ‘The Sámi’ is a collective term referring to several groups and communities of indigenous peoples that has traditionally been connected to the ancestral homeland of Sápmi. Sápmi stretches across mid- and northern parts of Norway, Sweden and Finland, and north-western parts of Russia (Kola peninsula). I, like many others who today consider themselves Norwegian, have Sámi ancestry, and it therefore appears as “close to home” for me to refer to concepts from a Sámi ontology.

<sup>4</sup> Traditional knowledges and indigenous knowledges are not the same, but they do overlap. These kinds of knowledges are recognized by the inseparability between knowledge as theory and practice, their embeddedness in local places/land, and that they are often collective and are orally transmitted within a community. Indigenous communities are among the groups who have best protected and developed traditional knowledge, but traditional knowledge is not restricted to indigenous communities or individuals. On the other hand, Indigenous knowledges cannot be reduced to traditional knowledges.

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## PRESENTATION OF AUTHORS IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER

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At its core, *Reflective Practice Research in International Collaboration – Developing Teacher Education in Togetherness* explores how teacher education can grow through dialogue, reflection, and shared humanity across borders. International collaboration is not simply institutional exchange, but an existential practice of mutual learning and development. Drawing on projects connecting Norway, Ukraine, Palestine, India and Finland, the anthology weaves a golden thread of togetherness in open inquiry. Through reflective practice research, contributors narrate lived experiences that reveal how teaching, partnership, and cross-cultural encounters can become spaces of ethical, spiritual, and relational transformation.

Anchored in an “apophatic epistemology” of deep wonder and not-knowing, the book moves beyond knowledge transfer toward wisdom-seeking and orientational knowledge. It shows how educators can meet across cultural, political, and historical divides to cultivate compassion, tolerance, and hope. Ultimately, the anthology gestures toward a vision of teacher education as a shared path of *becoming*, where reflection, vulnerability, and dialogue form the heart of learning in a fractured world.