

The decisive role of school in the lives of unaccompanied refugee minors in Norway



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This article is about the significant role school plays in the lives of unaccompanied refugee minors. School is important as an arena for learning and development as well as an arena to meet peers and build social networks. The article addresses rights and access to education for unaccompanied minors in Norway, and the various challenges they meet. These challenges frequently lead to leaving school early. Furthermore, it focuses on the psychosocial aspects of school, a secure setting allowing unaccompanied minors to be “ordinary” young people.

Discourse excerpts from interviews conducted in connection with an ongoing Norwegian research project are used to demonstrate the issues discussed. To promote school achievement, the importance of recognizing unaccompanied minors’ needs as well as resources is emphasized. Finally, a comprehensive approach to refugee schooling by providing educational and psychosocial support in various arenas – inside and outside school – is recommended.

Keywords: unaccompanied refugee minors, school, psychosocial, comprehensive approach.

Introduction

School plays a significant role in the lives of unaccompanied refugee minors. It is not only a place to learn, i.e. an arena for learning and development, it also is a place to be, i.e. an arena to meet peers, establish friendships and build new social networks. Moreover, the everyday classroom routines and

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procedures provide a safe and stable environment that is important for young refugees who are in a vulnerable and uncertain situation in unfamiliar surroundings. Education strengthens unaccompanied minors’ opportunities to cope with their new life situation and helps them to become independent and active participants in Norwegian society.

During the last few decades, Norwegian society has undergone major changes. Comprehensive emigration to Norway, consisting of both migrant workers and refugees, has contributed to a more ethnically and culturally diverse society. This has led to a growing number of language minority children in Norwegian schools. How to relate to the increasingly diverse pupil populations in Norwegian schools is a substantial challenge for education policy as well as educational practice in Norway.

The Norwegian immigration context

Norwegian society, previously perceived as fairly homogeneous, has changed substantially over the past 50 years. Refugees from Eastern Europe after World War II, labour migrants from Europe and the rest of the world in the 1970s, followed by refugees in the 1980s and 1990s until today, have contributed to a more heterogeneous society.

Twenty years ago, immigrants and Norwegians born to immigrant parents totalled 183,000 persons, or 4.3 per cent of Norway’s population. At the beginning of 2012, these two groups had risen to 655,000 persons or 13.1 per cent of the population (SSB 2012a). A total of 163,500 persons with a refugee background, i.e. residents who came to Norway due to flight, were living in Norway on 1 January 2012. They accounted for 30 per cent of all immigrants in Norway, and 3.3 per cent of the Nor-

wegian population. The two largest groups were persons with a refugee background from Iraq and Somalia (SSB 2012b).

Children and youth represent a significant proportion of asylum seekers and refugees, either arriving with their families or alone, i.e. unaccompanied refugee minors. The term unaccompanied refugee minors refers to refugee children and youths under 18 years of age who come to Norway without their parents or other carers with parental responsibility.

From the late 1990s onwards, the number of unaccompanied refugee minors seeking asylum in Norway has markedly increased. In 1996, less than 100 unaccompanied minors applied for asylum, whereas in 2008 almost 1,400 unaccompanied minors arrived. Then, in 2009, there was a sharp increase with 2,500 arrivals. Due to a tightening of Norwegian asylum policy, the number of unaccompanied asylum seekers significantly decreased in 2010 and 2011, when respectively 892 and 858 unaccompanied minors applied for asylum.

The majority, i.e. about 80 per cent, of the unaccompanied refugee minors are boys. Most of them are between 15 to 17 years of age; only approximately 10 per cent are under 15 years old (Eide and Broch 2010). In recent years, unaccompanied minor refugees primarily came from Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia. Yet, in 2011 a number of unaccompanied minors came from North African countries, such as Algeria and Libya.

Young unaccompanied refugees often come from places where schooling has been disrupted or no formal schooling is available. Moreover, many of them have been exposed to traumatic events prior to or during their flight. As a result, most unaccompanied refugee minors have high educational needs and require special attention as regards their psychosocial needs.

The decisive importance of school

After the rigours of departure from their home country and during their flight, unaccompanied refugee minors will meet new challenges when they seek refuge in Norway. First, there is the waiting time in the reception or care centres¹ while their asylum applications are processed, which is often

experienced as very demanding because of all the new things to relate to as well as the uncertainty regarding the application outcome. It may take quite some time before it is finally decided whether the unaccompanied minor will get asylum and can stay in Norway or not.

Being able to go to school – like Norwegian children and youths in their age group – means a lot to unaccompanied minors in a period of their lives that is often characterized by having to cope with traumatic memories of the past as well as concerns for the future. At school, young refugees can acquire academic knowledge, Norwegian language proficiency and cultural competence, i.e. competencies that are crucial to becoming active and independent members of Norwegian society. Unfortunately, in Norway many young unaccompanied refugees drop out of education and employment as well as social participation more generally (Eide and Broch 2010; de Luna 2009; Oppedal, Jensen and Seglem 2008).

Below, school will first be presented as *a place to learn*, addressing unaccompanied minors' rights and access to education in Norway, different introduction programmes and some of the challenges they meet. Then, school is presented as *a place to be*, with an emphasis on the school's sociocultural and psychosocial aspects, an arena where unaccompanied minors can socialize with classmates and be "normal" children and young people.

The school as a place to learn

Unaccompanied refugee minors are a very diverse group of students, e.g., with regard to gender, age, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic background, previous education and the training received after their arrival in Norway. Since their Norwegian language proficiency and academic knowledge, as well as their sociocultural competence, can vary significantly, they come to school with very different backgrounds.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), under Articles 28 and 29, states the right to education for all children up to and including the age of 18. Since 2003, the Convention's regulations have been incorporated into

Norwegian law through the Human Rights Act. This means that *all* children in Norway have equal access to school services. The right to education is of great importance to protect children's developmental needs, to promote optimal conditions for growing up and to safeguard children's future. The Norwegian *Education Act* (Act relating to Primary and Secondary Education and Training 1998) § 2–1 first paragraph states that all children and young people aged 6–16 years, who are expected to stay in Norway for more than three months, have both a right and an obligation to primary education. The right to compulsory primary education is independent of children's residence status, i.e. the children may be asylum seekers, have been granted residence or reside illegally in Norway.

Compulsory education for children aged 6–16 years

In Norway, compulsory schooling takes ten years and children start school at the age of six. The ten-year compulsory school, called *grunnskolen*, comprises two main stages: primary school (grades 1–7) and lower secondary school (grades 8–10). The municipalities are responsible for operating and administering primary and lower secondary schools.

Several Norwegian studies show great variation in the way municipalities organize introductory education for asylum-seeking and refugee children (NOU 2010: 7; Sletten and Engebriktsen 2011; Valenta 2008). In the different municipalities, one can find various kinds of introduction programmes for newly arrived asylum-seeking and refugee students.

In general, the introduction programmes can be classified as follows:

- *Regular classes* – From day one (or after the introductory class) the refugee children receive regular education – along with Norwegian children – at their local school. Although the children are included in the regular class, they may get special Norwegian language tuition and bilingual subject teaching – while some are also offered mother tongue teaching.
- *Special introductory classes* – Newly arrived students are given training in special preparatory classes. When the refugee students master Norwegian “sufficiently” (a relatively in-

distinct term), both orally and in writing, they are transferred to regular classes.

- *Combined classes* – Regular classes combined with introductory classes. Newly arrived students are included in a regular classroom from day one but they also participate in a parallel introductory class with special language training.
- *Special introductory schools* – Newly arrived asylum-seeking children first follow an adapted training programme at a special introductory school, which is not necessarily the local school.

The most common introductory programme for asylum-seeking and refugee children in Norwegian primary schools is the mainstreaming model “regular classes”, possibly combined with an introductory class (Sletten and Engebriktsen 2011). The relative merit of the *mainstreaming* model versus *withdrawal* (i.e. withdrawing students from the regular class for the purpose of adapted education) is that it helps refugee children to be part of a regular class, which gives them the opportunity to socialize with Norwegian peers. The disadvantage of this model is that there is often less focus on adjusted language and subject teaching, including the acquisition of fundamental words and concepts through explanations in Norwegian and/or the mother tongue.

Education provision for youth over 16 years old

Following a reform in 1994, everyone having successfully completed compulsory school or equivalent education has a statutory right to attend upper secondary education in Norway. Around 96 per cent of every cohort of students that finishes compulsory school enters upper secondary school (Markussen, Frøseth and Sandberg 2011). The county authorities are responsible for providing upper secondary education and training.

While access to education for asylum-seeking children of compulsory school age (6–16 years) is enshrined in the Education Act, asylum-seeking youth aged 16–18 years do not have the same access to education. To be entitled to admission to (lower and upper) secondary school, young people

over 16 years old need a residence permit.² Asylum-seeking youth in reception centres often end up in adult migrant classes offering education in Norwegian language and social studies, i.e. learning about Norwegian society. However, it is up to the municipality or the county to decide whether to provide education for asylum-seeking youth over 16 years old during the reception phase or not. Even without legal rights, subsidies are made by the government to municipalities offering education to young asylum seekers aged between 16 and 18, who do not have the schooling equivalent of Norwegian compulsory school. As long as there is no national legislation on the right to education for asylum-seeking youth, schooling provisions in the various municipalities may vary a lot.

However, unaccompanied asylum-seeking youth may be admitted to secondary education while their asylum application is processed, but if their application is rejected they have no right to complete the school year. Since the majority of unaccompanied minors seeking asylum in Norway are between 15 to 17 years of age, many will be affected by the fact that access to adequate schooling for this age group is neglected, as well as being difficult to find out about (de Luna 2009).

As soon as refugee minors get their residence permit, they will have a right to further education. Yet, the condition for admission to secondary schools is that the students have completed compulsory school (primary and lower secondary school) or equivalent education (Education Act § 3-1). Refugee students who have not completed Norwegian compulsory school or its equivalent have to follow a course programme (one to three years, depending on each student's needs) offering a specially adapted compulsory education curriculum for young people and/or adults, before they can enter upper secondary school. Another alternative for students with short residence in Norway and incomplete compulsory education is attending an "introductory class" at a regular upper secondary school.

While general upper secondary education has a length of three years, vocational study programmes usually involve two years' school-based training followed by two years of apprenticeship in a workplace. The vocational study programmes

lead to vocational qualifications, such as a craft certificate or a journeyman's certificate.

The main reason for the high percentage of youth choosing to go to upper secondary school in Norway is that there are few jobs available for young adults who leave school after lower secondary school. Formal qualifications are of decisive importance for getting permanent employment. However, even though most young people in Norway begin at upper secondary school, far from everybody completes (Markussen, Frøseth and Sandberg 2011).

Completion and dropout in upper secondary education

At present, Norwegian upper secondary schools have high dropout rates. One out of three students does not complete upper secondary education within five years (Markussen, Frøseth and Sandberg 2011).

Language minority students not only continue to a lesser extent to upper secondary school, they also have a higher dropout rate when they first enter upper secondary education. Even though dropout is by no means an exclusively immigrant problem, the concurrence of various background factors leads to a significantly higher dropout rate among minority students. In vocational training in particular, many students drop out.

Minority students who themselves have emigrated to Norway, especially immigrants from Asia and Africa, have a significantly lower degree of completion than Norwegian-born youth with minority parents (NOU 2010: 7). For example, only half of the minority students who were immigrants themselves and started in the first year of secondary education in 2003, completed secondary education five years later (ibid. 191).

When discussing the causes of minority youth dropping out of secondary school, several factors may be indicated, such as socioeconomic background, difficult transitions between different school types, low grade points from compulsory school, unfamiliarity with the school's values and insufficient learning environments. However, several studies have shown that inadequate Norwegian language skills are a central reason why minority students do

poorly in school and choose to interrupt their education earlier than majority students (Valenta 2008). Despite the fact that minority students are ambitious and have a high motivation to succeed, it turns out that their learning outcomes are significantly lower than ethnic Norwegian students' outcomes (NOU 2010: 7). A teacher attached to an adapted compulsory school programme for young refugees says the following about her students:

*They have an intense desire to learn ... and I am completely amazed when I see the transition from teaching unmotivated Norwegian young people to these very excited youngsters here. But it's all about frameworks facilitating performance. The need for mastering, to master, is the same wherever you come from. But all my students have said what they want, and everyone wants to go more to school.*³

Obviously, one needs more than motivation and ambition to be able to succeed in Norwegian schools. Many language minority students say that school was more difficult than they had thought in advance; they experienced many subjects as problematic because the words and expressions used in the textbooks were difficult to understand (Lødding 2009).

The transition from lower to upper secondary education is hard for all students, but especially for refugee students who come to Norway late in their educational career. Several reports indicate that young refugees frequently start in upper secondary school before their academic and language skills are good enough to follow upper secondary education (NOU 2010: 7). To learn Norwegian as a second language so well that it can function as an adequate language for instruction will take five to seven years (Cummins 2000). Children and young people learn relatively quickly to talk about everyday things in a new language, but it takes much longer before they have acquired the academic language and discourse that are required in the different subjects taught at school. In order to succeed in school, minority students need to learn more than a new language. They have to learn different norms and forms of language and discourse (Pastoor 2008).

Furthermore, refugee students who have attended school in their home country often have experiences from an educational system that is very different from the Norwegian system. Norwegian schools have a learning culture, which values that

students actively contribute with their own ideas and reflections. A teacher of newly arrived young refugees reports that they often struggle to adapt to the Norwegian culture of learning:

Most of them really like tasks that are very specific in which the response is measurable. For example, we have a boy who loves grammar, and that is because his grammar exercises until now have consisted of filling in, such as the plural form of nouns. And once he knows how, then it is great fun to complete twenty such nouns. But if he has to write a little story, about something where you need to analyse, evaluate and reflect a little, and even worse if you need to use a little imagination too, then Norwegian is not so much fun anymore. It is too woolly.

Also, young refugees' mental health may have consequences for their school functioning. Due to needs and concerns related to the migration process, as well as traumatic experiences from before and during their flight, many young unaccompanied refugees struggle with anxiety, insomnia, nightmares, restlessness and concentration difficulties (Bean 2006; Dittmann and Jensen 2010; Oppedal, Jensen and Seglem 2008). These symptoms, every so often resulting from a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), may lead to academic as well as social problems in school.

The educational, mental and emotional problems that unaccompanied refugee youths struggle with in school need to be taken seriously and followed up by providing support on site and/or outside school. On site, the students may require support from the school nurse or the Educational Psychology Services (*Pedagogisk-psykologisk tjeneste*, PPT). They also may be referred to the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Outpatient Clinic (*Barne- og ungdomspsykiatrisk poliklinikk*, BUP). However, the screening and follow-up by the Educational Psychology Services are often unsatisfactory (Bengtson and Ruud 2007).

The school as a place to be

Although unaccompanied refugee minors may struggle to adapt to the new conditions in their host society, as well as have to cope with their traumatic experiences from the past, they are also normal children and adolescents who cannot ta-

ke breaks from their lives and their development from childhood to adulthood (Bengtson and Ruud 2007). Their new life in exile may time and again be difficult as these young people experience a number of critical transitions simultaneously.

Three transitional processes, which are important in relation to the role schools play, are emphasized here:

- A *socialization process*, i.e. the development from childhood to adulthood through interaction with other community members – both adults and peers – in order to acquire the expertise needed to become an active and independent participant in the community and society they are part of.
- An *integration process*, i.e. the adaptation to their new life in Norway – a society with other demands concerning social, cultural and language skills as the basis for interaction and inclusion.
- A *recuperation process*, i.e. the construction of a new and meaningful life in Norway after potentially traumatizing events from before and during the flight, as well as the mental strains that life in exile often brings about.

The many challenges that adjusting to a new life in an unfamiliar environment entails makes young refugees at times quite vulnerable – especially unaccompanied refugee minors who do not have a family supporting them. Nevertheless, with support and help from significant others, this critical phase of resettlement also provides opportunities for development and mastery. A school environment that promotes learning, social inclusion and coherence in life gives refugee minors hope for a better future.

The socialization process in school, involving the acquisition of skills essential to active participation in Norwegian society, also represents an integration process for refugee students. As processes of socialization and integration are more or less parallel processes in unaccompanied refugees' encounters with Norwegian schools, they will be presented together in the next section.

An arena for socialization and integration

Socialization refers to the process of interaction through which individuals acquire norms, beliefs and values characteristic of the community or so-

ciety they are part of. While the first socialization, also called *primary socialization*, traditionally takes place in the family, children's *secondary socialization* takes place in other arenas, such as school, the after-school programme and among peers. School plays a central role in unaccompanied minors' adjustment to Norwegian society. Through interaction with significant others in the classroom and on the school grounds, refugee students appropriate Norwegian norms and values. However, there may often be a significant discrepancy between the knowledge and social and cultural norms that refugee students acquire in Norwegian school and what was conveyed during their socialization at home.

Young refugees emphasize school as the central place for meeting young Norwegians (Solberg 1997). Nevertheless, it appears that students with minority backgrounds may often feel excluded at school, both inside and outside the classroom (Pastoor 2008; Sandbæk and Einarsson 2008). An unaccompanied African teenage girl, who recently started in the adapted compulsory education programme, says that she does not have any Norwegian friends, only a few friends of a non-Norwegian background:

I like to chat with friends, talking and laughing ... If you take the bus with them [Norwegian peers], they do not like sitting next to you. Or if you have any questions, they will not answer you. They do not like us. Maybe because I do not speak Norwegian well enough.

The challenges young refugee students encounter in their social relations with Norwegian youths are also a topic of concern for their teachers, as the conversation below shows.

Teacher 1: And then, for the whole group, it is important to become part of a Norwegian youth setting, to have Norwegian friends and have a job. It is important for the cultural part, for language learning, for everything. There we see a big difference between those who are involved in Norwegian settings and those who are not.

Teacher 2: There is some scepticism both ways. But I see that it is important to have Norwegian friends.

Teacher 1: It is also important for them to be in contact with young people in order to understand a little more about who they are themselves, as many

of them come here and do not think of themselves as youth. They are adults in their own eyes, and at home they may even have worked for many years and have a different perception of being eighteen.

It is important that young refugees get the opportunity to develop as normal children and adolescents (Bengtson and Ruud 2007). Making friends, in school and beyond, will certainly enhance their psychosocial adaptation to the new society.

A salutogenic arena

In international research, school is not only emphasized as an important arena for learning and development for young refugees, but also as a *salutogenic* arena – an arena that supports their mental health and well-being (Andersson et al. 2010; de Luna, 2009; Rutter 2006).

“The salutogenic model”, which is concerned with the relationship between health, stress and coping, was introduced by medical sociologist Aaron Antonovsky (1987). According to Antonovsky, to be able to succeed in life despite anxieties and uncertainties, it is essential to experience that one’s life “hangs together”, i.e. represents a coherent entity. In Antonovsky’s model, people’s *sense of coherence* consists of three components, i.e. comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness.

The prevalence of mental health problems, primarily related to post-traumatic stress, anxiety and depression, proves to be much higher among unaccompanied refugee minors than among refugee children who come with their family (Derluyn 2005). For refugee minors who have experienced uprooting as well as disruptions, it is of vital importance to develop a *sense of coherence* as well as a *sense of belonging* in their lives (Nordanger, Mjåland and Lie 2006). Positive relationships in school, with teachers and peers, will positively contribute to young refugees’ experiences of belonging, identity and coherence in their new life. Moreover, attending school and having a purpose in life promotes the development of young refugees’ coping skills and self-esteem.

The school’s salutogenic role in the lives of refugee children is in line with Article 39 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states:

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of: any form of neglect, exploitation or abuse; torture or any other form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; or armed conflicts. Such recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child.

Concluding remarks

Access to school, as a place to learn and a place to be, is essential to provide unaccompanied refugee children and youths with the opportunity to reach their full potential while finding their way in Norwegian society. Even though refugee students show both high motivation and great efforts in school, many fail to complete upper secondary education. In vocational training in particular, the dropout rate is high (Markussen, Frøseth and Sandberg 2011; NOU 2010: 7).

Unaccompanied refugee minors are a vulnerable group of students who need support in different ways to language minority students, who are Norwegians born to immigrant parents and receive all of their education in Norway. To avoid dropping out of upper secondary school, young refugees depend on getting support concerning academic as well as mental health issues. Furthermore, it is important to look more closely at measures that can promote social inclusion as young refugees often experience difficulties in becoming part of Norwegian peer groups. Struggling with both academic and social functioning at school may lead to problem behaviour and marginalization. Yet, international and national research emphasizes not attributing a victim role to unaccompanied refugee minors; one should rather focus on their opportunities as they prove to be resourceful children and adolescents (Eide and Broch 2010; Kohli 2007; de Luna 2009; Watters 2008).

Policymakers, educational authorities, schools and teachers face many challenges in providing adequate and equal education for unaccompanied refugee minors. However, in order to be able to succeed, it is important that the refugee minors’

individual needs, as well as their resources, are taken into account in school. Adopting a holistic view, supporting the whole child, exposes a need for a comprehensive approach to refugee schooling that takes into consideration refugee minors' educational as well as psychosocial needs. Moreover, a comprehensive approach requires close cooperation between those engaged in the various provisions supporting young refugees – both at school and beyond.

In order to allow young unaccompanied refugees to succeed in school, as well as to master their new life situation, their schooling has to take place within a comprehensive range of frameworks supporting their learning, development and well-being. As one of the teachers said: "... it's all about frameworks facilitating performance."

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Endnotes

- ¹While the Directorate of Immigration (UDI) has responsibility for the reception centres and units accommodating unaccompanied asylum seekers aged 15 to 18, unaccompanied minors under 15 years of age stay in separate *care centres* run by the Child Welfare Services.
- ²Meanwhile, it is questioned whether the lack of a right to upper secondary education for asylum-seeking minors without a residence permit is in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (NOU 2010: 7, 318).
- ³The quotations cited in the article come from interviews conducted in connection with the research project *Unaccompanied refugee minors resettling in Norway. Focusing on education, accommodation and care provisions (FUS)*. Project leader: Lutine de Wal Pastoor. For more information: <http://www.nkvt.no/en/Pages/ProjectInfo.aspx?prosjektid=1265>

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