



“Children aren’t just the future. They’re the present as well.”

- A report on how children and young people feel about growing up in Norway



Annex to Norway's report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2016
The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs

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Tom-leon, 7

Preface

In the autumn of 2016, Norway will submit its report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child regarding its efforts towards implementing the Convention on the Rights of the Child (hereinafter “CRC”). In 2015 the Norwegian Ministry of Children and Equality (BLD) tasked the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir) with preparing a report on children’s and young people’s experiences of growing up in Norway. This report will serve as an annex to the Government’s own report.

The rights of children and young people in Norway are prominent. The country had a raft of legislation to protect children’s rights even before it pledged to follow the CRC. Nevertheless, the CRC put the rights of people under 18 higher up on the agenda. In co-operation with NGOs, the Norwegian authorities have gradually strengthened the legal position of children. Today, Norway is considered a pioneer when it comes to CRC compliance and promoting children’s rights.

The title of the report is a quote from one of the young people who took part when Bufdir and Save the Children Norway held a youth consultation in November 2015 in Oslo. This report conveys children’s and young people’s experiences of growing up in Norway today, and the changes they would like to see in the future. Thanks to statistics from nationwide surveys such as “Elevundersøkelsen” and Ungdata, Bufdir is able to provide an overview of the youth population as a whole. Generally speaking, young people in Norway are happy. And although the number of young people who speak of annoyances and challenges in their adolescence is relatively small, we’re talking about a great many individuals. This is why this report takes a closer look at some of the experiences of these young people.

Our special thanks go to all the children and young people who took the time to share their experiences, aspirations, and visions in connection with this report. Even though some of the stories must have been difficult to talk about, the children and young people were always engaged and obliging. Thanks also go to Save the Children Norway, which helped with the planning and implementation of both the major youth consultation and a focus group discussion with pupils from Sinsen primary school. Thanks as well to the Norwegian Ombudsman for Children and the Forum for the Convention on the Rights of the Child (FFB) for their wise suggestions in the early phases of the project. A number of organisations have been helpful in recruiting participants for the focus groups and the consultation. Thanks to Ungdom og fritid (Norwegian National Youth Club Association), Organisasjon mot offentlig diskriminering (Organisation against discrimination in the public sector), Norwegian National Children’s and Youth Council, UngOrg (Oslo Children’s and Young People’s Organisations), Hordaland Youth County Executive Board, Østfold County Commissioner, Mental helse ungdom (Youth Mental Health), Voksne for barn (Adults for Children Organisation), Landsforeningen for barnevernsbarn (National Association for Children subject to intervention from the Norwegian Child Welfare Service), Unge funksjonshemmede (Association for Young Disabled People), Norwegian Sámi Association, Sámi Pathfinders, and Norwegian Red Cross Oslo. Bufdir would also like to thank the Troms County Commissioner for organising the drawing competition.

Oslo, September 2016

IF CHILDREN COULD DECIDE: 22 SUGGESTIONS FROM THE CHILDREN

SCHOOL AND LEISURE

1

MORE INDIVIDUAL ADAPTATION OF TEACHING AT ALL GRADES

School education must be varied and adapted so that all pupils feel a sense of achievement, regardless of their academic or physical abilities.



2

INCREASED KNOWLEDGE AMONG TEACHERS ABOUT DISABILITIES

Teachers must be better informed about living with disabilities in order to prevent young people from falling behind academically and/or being socially excluded.



3

INCREASED KNOWLEDGE AMONG TEACHERS ABOUT BULLYING

Teachers must have the expertise to identify and stop bullying at an early stage.



4

SAFE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Schools must have their own social workers and bullying programmes to prevent social exclusion among pupils.



5

MORE SÁMI EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

Children and young people whose first language is Sámi must be given more Sámi education at school, without sacrificing their other learning.



6

MORE INFORMAL MEETING PLACES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

More informal meeting places such as youth clubs, playgrounds, areas for ball games, and cafés for children and young people must be created to give children and young people from different cultural and economic backgrounds a place to come together.



INFORMATION AND CO-DETERMINATION

7

REAL CO-DETERMINATION IN ALL MATTERS

The views of children and young people must be taken into account when adults make decisions that will impact them.



8

MANDATORY CO-DETERMINATION BODIES AT SCHOOL

School councils, class meetings, and other democratic forums for pupil participation must be mandatory in primary and lower secondary schools and upper secondary schools.

9

MORE INFORMATION ON RIGHTS AND CO-DETERMINATION OPPORTUNITIES

Information on the CRC and other rights must be communicated directly to all children and young people.



10

GREATER INFLUENCE ON AND BETTER ACCESS TO RELEVANT INFORMATION FOR CHILDREN SUBJECT TO INTERVENTION FROM THE NORWEGIAN CHILD WELFARE SERVICE

The Norwegian Child Welfare Service must include children and young people in every process and ensure that they are given important information in a timely and easily understandable manner.

11

QUICKER DECISIONS ON ASYLUM APPLICATIONS FOR UNACCOMPANIED MINORS SEEKING ASYLUM

Unaccompanied minors seeking asylum must be given quick decisions on their asylum applications to give them more stability in their day-to-day lives.

12

MORE REPRESENTATIVES AND GUARDIANS FROM IMMIGRANT BACKGROUNDS

More guardians and representatives from immigrant backgrounds must be recruited, as they are better placed to understand the day-to-day lives of unaccompanied minors seeking asylum.

13

INCREASED KNOWLEDGE IN THE HEALTH-CARE SECTOR ON DISABILITIES IN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Employees in the health-care sector must be given better expertise in disabilities in children and young people to ensure that they receive effective and targeted treatment.



DISCRIMINATION

14 EQUAL TREATMENT FOR ALL PUPILS

All school pupils, regardless of their gender, religion, culture, capability, social background, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender identity/expression, must be treated equally by teachers and classmates.



15 MORE INFORMATION ABOUT BULLYING FOR CHILDREN IN KINDERGARTEN

Kindergarten staff must teach children what bullying is and why it is unacceptable, so that the children can put what they are experiencing into words and speak up if they feel they are being treated unfairly.

16 BETTER MONITORING PROCEDURES IN SCHOOL TO MAKE IT SAFER TO SPEAK UP ABOUT BULLYING

Teachers must monitor bullying more closely without letting this backfire on the whistleblower, such as by guiding the parents of bullies in how they can monitor their own child.

17 TEACHERS WHO ARE MORE PRESENT

Teachers must work more actively to prevent bullying, and serve as visible and confident leaders in the classroom and on the school playground.



18 INCREASED AWARENESS OF WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE BULLIED

Schools must invite children and young people to talk about what it's like to be bullied in order to show bullies what they're putting others through.



SAFETY AND HEALTH

19 FUNDS EARMARKED FOR SCHOOL HEALTH-CARE SERVICES

Funds must be earmarked for school health-care services (school nurses and school psychologists), so that all children and young people have someone to talk to.



20

BETTER SEX EDUCATION AT SCHOOL

Sex education must help to normalise the diversity of sexual orientations, gender expressions, and gender identities.

21

BETTER TRAINING IN HOW TO USE THE INTERNET AT SCHOOL

Training in sensible and safe internet use must be part of the curriculum in order to make children and young people aware of the challenges related to bullying, harassment, and other transgressive behaviour on the internet.



22

MORE AND BETTER OPPORTUNITIES FOR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND GOOD NUTRITION

All young people must have equal opportunities to participate in physical activities and to eat healthily, regardless of their cultural and economic backgrounds.



Sources: The youth consultation and focus groups

Report structure

This report consists of seven chapters. The first chapter describes the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, and areas of responsibility of the authorities associated with Norway's efforts to strengthen the CRC. The second chapter explains how the report has come to be and states which voices have been included in the report and how data has been collected in practice.

The third chapter looks at what makes young people in Norway enjoy school. This chapter takes a closer look at the challenges related to schooling for those with a disability, and concludes with a report on the leisure habits of young people.

Chapter four sheds light on some of the schemes young people use to influence their day-to-day lives, both at school and in their leisure time. This chapter allows for further accounts, including those of school pupils and young people subject to the intervention of the Norwegian Child Welfare Service. Chapter five focuses on various forms of discrimination in a number of groups of vulnerable young people. Bullying at school is highlighted as a particular challenge.

Chapter six looks at various aspects of health, especially mental health, in young people. This chapter includes stories of several young people, including unaccompanied minors seeking asylum, who describe some of the psychological pressures that they struggle with. The last section of this chapter describes the people that young people prefer to stick close to in order to feel more secure. The seventh and final chapter summarises the main findings of the report.



Jenni, 7

1 Introduction

The CRC was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 20 November 1989. Norway acceded to the CRC on 8 January 1991, promising to comply with its obligations. In 2003, the CRC became part of the Norwegian Act on Human Rights. This meant that the CRC was given precedence in the event of a conflict between the CRC and other Norwegian legislation. The CRC is the most supported international agreement in the world. Currently, only the United States has refused to accede to the CRC.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is a set of rights that ensure that children enjoy a full life that is free from unnecessary suffering, and that children can develop to the best of their potential and pursue their aspirations. The CRC is rooted in a basic premise of human rights – that all the world’s children have equal rights, regardless of their gender, race, ethnicity, social class, or sexual orientation. The CRC consists of 42 articles. Four of these represent the general principles of the convention as a whole: Non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, the right to life and development, and the right to be heard.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child consists of 18 independent experts in children’s rights. Their primary task is to assess and provide feedback on each country’s efforts towards realising the CRC. A key aspect of Norway’s efforts to strengthen the CRC is that Norwegian authorities submit a report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child every five years. The authorities’ reports to the UN consist of reporting on the authorities’ efforts to meet the obligations of the convention. The authorities have also submitted their own children’s reports to better convey the opinions of children and young people. The reports from civil society, often called “shadow reports”, have increasingly focused on the views of children – often in association with the organisations’ various disciplines and interests. All of the reports that Norway submits are read and culminate in a response from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in the form of a report with positive and negative comments.

What are the authorities’ responsibilities?

According to article 4 of the CRC, the state must take all appropriate legislative, administrative, and other measures necessary to implement the rights of the convention. The Norwegian authorities are responsible for ensuring that the CRC is strengthened and complied with so that Norwegian children actually have the rights to which they are entitled under the convention. In practice this means that the authorities amend legislation and regulations to safeguard children’s rights, such as after advice is given by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, as well as provide support by way of human and financial resources for measures designed to promote the CRC. Since the CRC is part of Norwegian domestic law through the Act on Human Rights, all authorities, individuals, and organisations are directly bound by the provisions of the convention.

There are also stakeholders outside of the public sphere who closely follow efforts regarding the implementation of the CRC. The Forum for the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (FBB)

was established in 1994 and consists of the Norwegian Ombudsman for Children and a number of institutions, organisations, and individuals who are working to strengthen the convention's position and practice in Norway and the rest of the world.

2 How has the report come to be?

Since the objective has been to get as close to children's and young people's day-to-day experiences as possible, the preferred method has been to speak to children and young people directly. No one knows the situation of children and young people better than children and young people themselves. Their voices can contribute credible and unique knowledge – knowledge that adults rarely possess. The experiences and desires contained in this report will influence future policies on children and young people, which are in turn of importance for children and young people throughout Norway. The topics covered in the report, and the outcome of the reporting process of which it is a part, concern children and young people. This is also why it has been important to speak with children and young people, to listen to them, and to take them seriously so that they have the opportunity to voice their opinion on and influence their own lives and situations.



Leah, 8

Who has provided input into the report?

The report is not exhaustive in terms of its selection of contributors or descriptions of challenges. The objective has been to provide an insight into children's and young people's views on growing up in general, and especially the views of marginalised children and young people. The primary task of Bufdir has been to collect, summarise, and disseminate the views of children and young

people on growing up in Norway today. The sources accorded the most attention in the report are descriptions from participants with whom Bufdir has been in direct contact.

In November 2015, Bufdir organised a youth consultation in Oslo in co-operation with Save the Children Norway. A gender-balanced group of 42 young people aged 14 to 17 from across Norway took part. Around half were there by virtue of their positions in various co-determination bodies for young people, while the other half belonged to various youth clubs. The following five topics were discussed: Learning and development, influence, discrimination, safety, and health. The young people were able to highlight the issues they felt were most relevant to each topic, as well as suggest improvements.

In addition, Bufdir has particularly wanted to get in touch with young people who, in one way or another, feel marginalised or find themselves in vulnerable situations. One objective has been to ensure a certain breadth to the voices heard, and to give a voice to those who, for various reasons, are seldom heard when children and young people get to have a say. Consequently, in the spring of 2016, Bufdir conducted seven focus group interviews:

- Young people with a non-Western background (four people)
- Children (seven people aged 9 and 10)
- Victims of bullying (three people)
- Young people subject to intervention from the Norwegian Child Welfare Service (three people)
- Young people with a disability (seven people)
- Unaccompanied minors over the age of 15 who are seeking asylum (eleven people)
- Young people with a Sámi background (two people)

The topics discussed were the same as at the youth consultation.

In addition to the youth consultation and focus groups, Bufdir organised a drawing competition on the subject of the CRC, in co-operation with the Troms County Commissioner. A total of nine classes ranging from first to third grade at three primary schools in the municipalities of Storfjord and Lenvik took part: Skibotn, Hatteng, and Rossfjord primary schools. The children were asked to draw situations from their own lives which, in one way or another, were connected with the CRC. The purpose was to ensure that even the youngest voices were included in the report. Several of the drawings have been published in the report. A total of 156 children and young people from across Norway have shared their experiences with Bufdir. 79 took part in discussions, and 77 contributed by way of their drawings.

Questions posed by young people on the website Ung.no – a public website for young people – are used to open each chapter. In order to give an overview of how the individual views and tendencies are distributed across the youth population as a whole, the report also uses quantitative sources such as NOVA's Ungdata and "Elevundersøkelsen", a pupil survey conducted by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research. "Elevundersøkelse" is one of the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research's online user surveys. It gives pupils the opportunity to say what they think about various aspects of their experiences at school. The survey is compulsory for pupils in the seventh and tenth grades of primary and lower secondary

schools, and in the first grade of upper secondary schools. The 416,000 respondents to the 2015 survey consisted of pupils in the fifth, sixth, and seventh grade of primary school, in the eighth, ninth, and tenth grades of lower secondary school, and in the first, second, and third grades of upper secondary school. “Ungdata” are local youth surveys in which pupils from up and down Norway answer questions about their lives and circumstances. The figures in *Ungdata – Nasjonale resultater* (national results) from 2014 are based on responses from 110,000 lower secondary school pupils and 46,000 upper secondary school pupils. Bufdir also sought to shed some light on the socio-economic conditions in which children are brought up. Several findings in NOVA’s *Sosiale forskjeller i unges liv* (social inequalities in the lives of young people) report from 2015, which was commissioned by Bufdir and the Norwegian Ministry of Health and Care Services, are therefore cited in this report.

Practical implementation

Children have their own convention because they, by virtue of their age, represent a group requiring special protection. In addition to all being aged under 18, one thing that all the participants in the focus groups had in common (apart from the youngest children) was that they faced challenges due to factors other than their age. This had implications for how Bufdir planned and conducted the discussions. To ensure that all the participants were aware of what they were agreeing to, information on the topics Bufdir wanted to talk about and what the findings were to be used for was provided well in advance. For participants under the age of 16, guardians were asked to give their consent on the child’s behalf.

The youth consultation was conducted according to the café dialogue method. In this way, participants were split into five groups and assigned separate tables with separate topics: Learning and development, influence, discrimination, safety, and health. They were then asked to discuss the topics freely and jot down as many ideas and thoughts on paper as possible. Each table had a moderator and a facilitator. The moderator’s job was to prompt discussion if there was silence, while the facilitator took notes. After a certain amount of time had passed, the groups were told to change tables and topics. The facilitator would remain where they were to present to the new group what had been said and noted so far. In this way, the new groups could build on the previous ones. The groups continued to rotate until all five had discussed all five topics. Towards the end of the day, each group was asked to formulate three suggestions for each topic. These suggestions were given to the Minister for Children and Equality, Solveig Horne, who brought the consultation to a close.

The primary focus of the report is the truth as perceived by young people, not necessarily how things are in the objective sense. Focus groups are appropriate for studies to which people’s attitudes, experiences, and the production of knowledge are key.¹ The focus group discussions were conducted as semi-structured group discussions. The introductory questions (e.g. “Do you enjoy school?”) were the same for all the groups. With regard to the various challenges faced by the participants, elements of the interview guide were adapted to each group. Unlike the consultation, for which notes were taken by either a facilitator or the participants themselves, the focus group discussions were recorded digitally and later transcribed. The participants were informed of this in advance, and no one found it to be problematic.

¹ Madriz (2000).

In the spring of 2016, a reference group was established of 12 young people who took part in either the youth consultation or the focus groups. Before the report was completed, these young people were given the opportunity to read it through and give their feedback.



Viktoria, 7



Martin, 8

3 School and leisure

“I’ve been at upper secondary school for two years now, but I don’t enjoy school socially. I’ve a few friends who I spend class meetings and break times and stuff with, but I always get the impression that I’m not that welcome, so I feel really excluded. I don’t have anyone to turn to either – there’s no one I feel comfortable turning to, because I feel like there aren’t many people who like me or who want to spend time with me.”

Young person, ung.no

The children and young people we spoke with largely said that they enjoy school.

Young people with a disability said that they often feel that teaching is badly adapted.

The children and young people said that they are very active in their free time. However, many feel that the range of recreational activities on offer is inadequate.

Enjoyment of school

The findings from the youth consultation and the focus groups were largely in line with Elevundersøkelsen’s findings. The main impression was that most enjoyed school. Two factors were particularly important: teaching – its form and content – and good friends.

“What I like about school is that we play and learn new things, and we can be with friends. What I like least about school is that some people swear and are bullies. They don’t want to play with the others.”

Girl, 9

“The best thing about school is that I can play with my friends. The worst thing about school is being taught things I already know and not learning new things. (...) I’ve got some help, but I don’t get any extra tasks, even though I know what we’re being taught. That’s when I get bored.”

Boy, 9

One of the participants in one of the focus groups explained their enjoyment of school like this:

“It’s a good environment. Friends, I feel secure around them. (...) I feel confident and can talk during my lessons. It’s because of my friends that I can talk. There’s a good school environment and classroom environment. I like the teachers, but the teaching programme can sometimes be a bit boring. They just show these PowerPoint presentations. Then people just, like, sit and sleep.”

Girl, 15

Article 29 – Goals of education

1. States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:

a) The development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.

Article 31 – Leisure, play and culture

1. States Parties recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

Quantitative findings

- 90% of pupils from fifth grade to the third grade of upper secondary school enjoy school.*
- 2.5% either do not particularly enjoy school or do not enjoy it at all. A further 8% enjoy school “slightly”.* This equates to around 82,000 pupils.
- 94% “always” or “often” have someone to spend their break time with.*
- Roughly 90% are part of an organisation, club, or team after they turn 10.**
- The likelihood of young people participating in organised recreational activities varies according to where in Norway they live. This likelihood is lowest in Nordland county at 56%, and highest in Sogn and Fjordane at 71%.**
- The higher the socio-economic status of the pupil’s parents, the more the pupil enjoys school.***
- The higher the socio-economic status of the pupil’s parents, the more likely the pupil is to take part in organised recreational activities.***

Sources: *Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research (2015), ** Nova (2015), *** Nova (2016).

For this girl, friends weren't just a reason for enjoying school, they were a direct reason for her being able to actively take part in classroom teaching. The main impression among both children and young people was that social well-being – having good friends and classmates – was more important than academic satisfaction for their enjoyment of school. Nevertheless, the form and content of teaching and the teachers' social skills were things that all the children and young people raised. The enjoyment of acquiring new knowledge was, for example, important for the youngest children's overall enjoyment of school. Despite the fact that many had a favourite subject – academic content thus being perceived as important – enthusiasm for learning seemed first and foremost to be borne out of the experience of learning something new. The children appeared to have a real thirst for knowledge and to be open to and happy about everything new the school could teach them. For the nine-year old boy quoted above, being taught what he already knew led to a feeling of lagging behind, in reference not to the others but to his own potential. Consequently both he and other individuals at the youth consultation expressed a clear desire for a better focus on teaching adapted to the individual, even for the most able pupils.

In terms of teaching methods, there seemed to be general agreement that teaching was, overall, badly adapted. When one focus group participant said that she found teaching boring, she was asked what was characteristic of a good teaching method:

“Varying the tasks. Doing something hands-on now and then. Not just assignments and tests. We could do role plays, for example. Not just read the book.”

Girl, 16

Variation and hands-on school activities were emphasised as important for academic satisfaction. This view was common and was shared by many at the youth consultation:

“There's too much teaching by the teachers, and too little time to do the tasks and really learn what we need to learn.”

Girl, 17

“We need more variety, more hands-on tasks, less homework, and fewer assignments.”

Girl, 16

Young Sámi people also agreed that the teaching programme was poorly adapted. They wanted more Sámi textbooks and for more of the curriculum to be taught in Sámi. One of the girls expressed clear dissatisfaction at how teaching in Sámi was conducted separately from the rest of the class.

“I think it's important that you have to learn about Sámi place names and things like that as part of Sámi social studies. That's really important. But at the same time you have to learn exactly the same things as the Norwegian class. You can't start teaching people different things. Because when you reach upper secondary school, you have to know the same things anyway. And the only thing you have to know is the Norwegian curriculum. I have to study Norwegian social studies off my own back because I was worried about lagging behind at upper secondary school. You feel like, 'OK, I've made a decision to hang on to a language', and so then you're forced to work even more than the others. It can feel a little discouraging. (...) Why can't the Norwegian pupils learn a bit more about the Sámi people and their culture, if only to debunk a few myths, perhaps? Then there'll be no more of that 'Wow, she's Sámi!' stuff.”

Girl, 17



Nicklas, 7

The girl almost felt as though she was being punished for having chosen Sámi as her first language. She felt compelled to study Norwegian social studies so as not to fall behind at upper secondary school. In addition, she wondered why Sámi language and culture were not more widely taught to Norwegian pupils – a measure which, in her view, would serve as a bridge-builder. When she asked the social studies teacher if teaching could be conducted so that Norwegian pupils could learn more about Sámi society, and she about Norwegian society, she was told that this was not possible. Several primary school pupils and two pupils from the youth consultation explained how they had tried unsuccessfully to suggest changes to teaching methods. The answers they got were that teaching was regulated by various plans and regulations and so was impossible to change. When one of the focus group participants was asked if her class ever got the opportunity to have a say on teaching, she answered as follows:

"If, for example, I ask the teachers if we can do something else because a task is boring, they just reply, 'No, that's not in our programme.' We have to follow it. They're the ones who decide. But this isn't what's best for us. We're the ones who have to learn, not them. So they should do things differently. But they don't listen to us."

Girl, 15

Those who proposed changes to the teaching programme and were told "no" largely perceived this to be a result of the teachers' unwillingness rather than actual regulations. According to the children and young people, reference was made to curricula and other regulations to avoid what the teachers considered to be unnecessary discussions. The children and young people found it unfair that they had so little say in teaching methods. In some cases teaching appeared to be

more tailored to the adults' wishes than to the young people's needs, but they felt that they had few opportunities to change this.

Challenges at school

The importance of education for future job opportunities is even greater for people with a disability than for the general population. The dropout rate is higher and many experience discrimination in the labour market.² In addition to the social challenges that young people with a disability face in school, there are often considerable challenges in relation to learning, teaching, and academic adaptation. Under article 23 of the CRC, young people with a disability are entitled to extra protection. This is in addition to the principle of no discrimination. The young people who took part in the focus group attended mainstream schools and largely followed mainstream teaching. They all expressed the view that the school and teaching were, in many cases, poorly adapted. One informant with osteoarthritis found long school days with sedentary classroom teaching especially difficult. One pupil with dyslexia explained that she was not given the extra time she was entitled to during exams. For one participant in a wheelchair, his time at lower secondary school was particularly difficult:

"Every hour I'd send a message to my mum: 'Come get me, I'm bored as hell.' Three years without any challenges. When we had English, it was like 'What's "hello" in English?' Who doesn't know that? Even my six-year-old sister knows that. I had almost no homework in three years. If I asked for it then yes, they'd sort some out. But it was just that kind of homework from third to fifth grade, and maybe not even that."

Boy, 16

The other two participants in wheelchairs shared similar experiences. One of the girls described the primary and lower secondary schools' way of addressing her challenges as follows:

"Primary school and lower secondary school are badly adapted. People didn't listen to us when we spoke out about things. The teachers at the lower secondary school said that they couldn't give me marks because it was harmful to me. Why, I don't know, but that's what they said, and that's how it was."

Girl, 17

She was puzzled by how the teachers had excluded her from the teaching programme. Wheelchair-users described scenarios from primary and lower secondary school where they found they were not allowed to take part in subjects they thought they were doing well in. They were bemused, irritated, and hurt by how their desire to learn and develop had been handled by teachers who, rather than adapt their teaching, refused to give them marks and/or homework. Wheelchair-users described a vicious circle in which they fell behind academically, which in turn made them even more different and inadequate in the eyes of others and also themselves. This resulted in further social isolation and less enjoyment at school. Everyone in the focus group expressed a high level of frustration regarding primary school and lower secondary school teachers who had been unable to create a learning environment that stimulated a sense of achievement. They described a school system in which teachers perceived the opportunities for academic participation as being limited because the pupils did not fit with the teaching programme. In their eyes, the teachers only rarely understood that the normal school

² Grue and Finnvoid (2014).

environment was insufficiently suited to these young people. The young people called for more knowledge among teachers, advisors, school nurses, and classmates about disabilities in order to avoid what they described as a problem-oriented focus on limitations. The adaptation of teaching required making teaching methods more accessible, as well as addressing issues related to having a disability in the content of the teaching:

“I’ve socialised very little with my friends, because they just shy away. Because they think, ‘Oh, a wheelchair, what now then?!’ They become very insecure. We’ve never learnt anything about what it’s like to sit in a wheelchair. But I’m ‘normal’. [Here she illustrates speech marks using her fingers].”

Girl, 17

“It’s really important that the class is aware that ‘Oh, we have one or more people with challenges in the class. What can we do to help?’ Teachers currently do too little of this.”

Boy, 17

This did not seem as much of an issue for those without a visible disability. One of the participants was affected by fatigue – tiredness, lack of energy, and lack of motivation – following an illness. Another had dyslexia. In many cases they could hide their challenges and simply assume the role of a “normal” young person. For the young people in wheelchairs, the situation was different. They described a childhood marked by loneliness, and said that they often missed having more social interaction with their peers. When the teachers focused on what made them different, or failed to focus on what they had in common with the other pupils, their peers often followed suit. In a school context, where others’ prejudices and lack of knowledge made socialising difficult, the experience of insufficient adaptation hurt all the more. According to these young people, even relatively small things – being allowed to participate more in physical education, and more discussion about disabilities in class – would have had major positive effects. A teaching programme that could not be adapted to these young people appears, in some cases, to have exacerbated the same traits that prevented participation initially. One of the girls in a wheelchair described how the perception of being academically incompetent robbed her of the opportunity to develop the very skills the teachers were looking for:

“The reason I like homework so much is because when I was at lower secondary school, I had no challenges, no homework. No Norwegian, no English, nothing. At lower secondary school they said I was worse than a fourth grader, but I’m actually quite smart. (...) How am I supposed to do well at school if I’m not given homework?”

The girl then went on to describe physical education:

“I’m not allowed to do PE. Sometimes I think I’d like to do PE, because I really enjoy being active. And I am everyday too, with almost no break. But I don’t do PE. The problem is that I can’t use my legs as quickly. I can walk, but I can’t use them as quickly. So I think, can’t I learn to use my arms better and faster, and so strengthen my arms?”

Girl, 17

This girl was not given the opportunity to do homework or to take part in physical education because the teachers did not consider her to be sufficiently competent. As the girl perceived herself as being smart enough and having strong enough arms to take part in PE, it was difficult for her to understand why she wasn’t being given the opportunity to develop. All of the young

people found it unfair and insulting that they were increasingly being defined as an aberrant group. One young person described her dream school as follows:

“The perfect school is one without prejudice, bullying, and discrimination. (...) One where teachers see the person, the individual, not the illness, not the wheelchair.”
Girl, 17

The pupils stressed that they were treated as people on an equal footing with others all too rarely. Regardless of financial considerations and universally designed buildings (to enable people with all kinds of special needs to get around), the general impression was, first and foremost, that the schools’ basic attitude to certain disabilities made social and academic adaptation difficult.



Sofie, 7

Leisure time

When we talk about the young people’s leisure time, in this report we mean the time after the end of the school day until bedtime. This also refers to the time used to do homework. In addition, it is common to split leisure time into organised leisure time and unorganised leisure time. Organised leisure time takes place in teams, clubs, and associations, while unorganised leisure time is all the free time outside of these organisations. Several participants at the youth consultation were unhappy with the range of leisure activities offered in their municipalities, despite the fact that they say they are active in their leisure time. The general impression was that the young people wanted greater public prioritisation of leisure activities for young people, regardless of where one lives, or how much one’s parents earn.

Most focus group and consultation participants took part in organised leisure activities, especially sport. Football, handball, figure skating, and swimming were some of the sports that were mentioned. While most had one organised activity that they pursued, some had several. A high degree of participation in leisure activities, and high standards with regard to homework and schoolwork, meant that there was sometimes too little time. Two primary school children had the following to say:

“I feel that when you’re at school, that’s when you should do school things. But when you’re at home, that’s when you should be doing leisure activities. It’s stressful when you don’t have the time to do it. So it’s almost a bit silly that we have homework. Perhaps we could have some tests on the last day of the week.”

Girl, 9

“Sometimes homework is a bit stressful. Because with all the leisure activities I do, sometimes you have to say ‘Hmm, no, I’ll have to skip that because I’ve not done such-and-such piece of homework.’ I think we could have less homework.”

Girl, 9

All the primary school pupils spent a lot of time on homework. In addition, they all had several leisure activities that they pursued. The girls quoted above expressed some frustration over how often homework had to be completed at the expense of leisure activities. While learning at school was described as something positive and enjoyable, the need to do homework was often perceived as an unfair encroachment on time that the pupils felt they should be able to spend doing what they wanted. The fact that doing homework was largely perceived as an obligation resulted in a lost sense of freedom. Three of the youngest girls and two of the youngest boys therefore wanted less homework.

In addition to homework and organised leisure activities, “hanging out with friends” was also pointed out as a common way to spend leisure time. Youth clubs were also important for many. These are an informal place to meet, requiring nothing more than good behaviour, and for some they represent a much sought-after sanctuary:

“It’s cool to have somewhere where you can just hang out with your friends. Maybe play some pool. No demands or strict rules from the adults, you know.”

Boy, 15

Unlike sport with its focus on competition, and school with its focus on learning, youth clubs were described as arenas where young people could be themselves more, on their own terms. For those who used the youth clubs the most, school and organised sport were described as arenas where the adults made the decisions. The impression given was that the youth clubs’ informal structure enabled the young people to decide much of the content themselves, whether pool, video games, surfing the web, or talking with adults about the things the young people wanted to talk about. Compared with school and sport, these young people experienced a greater degree of participation at youth clubs.

4 Information and co-determination

“Can I decide myself whether I want to go to relief accommodation or not once I’m 15? I live in a foster home and have to go to relief accommodation one weekend a month, and three weeks during the year. I think I’m entitled to decide for myself whether this is what I want. But the people I live with and the Norwegian Child Welfare Service say I have to go to the relief accommodation. I have a sister who now lives on her own. (...) I’m tired of not being able to make decisions about my life. I can’t wait until I’m 18 and can decide things for myself! So please help me.”

Young person, ung.no

Many of the young people said they perceive their school’s arrangements for participation and co-determination as barely being effective.

The children and young people said that they mostly get to decide how they spend their leisure time.

Young people who are subject to intervention from the Norwegian Child Welfare Service, who have a disability, or who are an unaccompanied minor seeking asylum said that they find access to information to be very limited.

Co-determination at school

The youth consultation identified large municipal variations in the schools’ teaching of democracy. Most described a school day in which the teachers mostly listened to them, and all agreed that initiatives such as school council, class meetings, and teachers’ meetings were fundamentally important forums for conveying their own wishes and needs. The pupils, however, had very different experiences of the true impact of such initiatives. The general impression was that most were unhappy with the schemes in practice. One of the young people had this to say about class meetings and the school council scheme:

“We have class meetings. But we don’t use these for the class. The teacher uses this time for their things, when we have tests and stuff. She just says, ‘I’m not spending my time on tests and things, we’ll use the class meeting time for it.’ And when the school council has something to say, we get the last five minutes. So it’s not exactly a class meeting, to be honest.”

Girl, 15

The pupils expressed great disappointment in what they felt was a superficial attempt at co-determination processes on

Article 12 – Respect for the views of the child

The parties shall ensure that children who are capable for forming their own opinions have the right to freely express these opinions in all matters that concern them, and to give these opinions due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.

Article 13 – Freedom of expression

Children have the right of freedom of expression. This right shall include the right to search for, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, without limitations, orally, in writing, or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child’s choosing.

Quantitative findings

- 68% of school pupils from fifth grade to the third grade of upper secondary school feel that teachers are good or very good at allowing pupils to take part in school council work, while a further 23% feel this is true to some extent.*
- 51% believe that the school often, very often, or always listens to pupils’ suggestions. 49% believe that this is the case only occasionally, rarely, or never.*
- 39% help by making suggestions about how teaching is conducted in many, most, or all subjects. 35% feel that they can have a say in some subjects. 26% feel that they cannot have a say in deciding how teaching is structured in any or only very few subjects.*
- 62% find that they can often or always have a say in class rules. 23% say this is the case occasionally, while 16% rarely or never get a say in class rules.*

Source: *Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research (2015)

the part of the school. The amount of time spent on such efforts varied internally at the schools, and it was often up to the teacher at the time to determine the importance of pupil democratic processes. One described the entire school council scheme as “for show”, because they never got to discuss “the things that matter”. The “things that matter” were never elaborated upon, but research into pupil democratic processes in Norway has shown that the school often puts a limit on what can be discussed regarding academic and pedagogical activities.³ The pupils were most frustrated not about *what* they could discuss, but rather *how* decisions were made on what was discussed. Among the negative reports of school co-determination processes, the feeling that these were only carried out for show was the most common:

“The school council just ends up in a stalemate with the teachers without being heard. Or rather, we’re heard but not listened to. What’s the point? Ultimately, they just do what they want anyway.”

Girl, 16

Many young people at the consultation said that they got the chance to say what they thought about various things, but in reality they were not taken seriously. As they understood it, the obligatory invitations to school council meetings where they seldom got their views heard were close to pointless. Someone else at the consultation pointed out how the young people’s wishes were deemed to be wise and well-considered in matters where the school management agreed with them and wanted the same, yet were deemed unwise and ill-considered when the school disagreed. As this boy also pointed out, this means that young people’s opinions, even when they seemingly had a tangible impact, were in reality attributed little significance. This was perceived as duplicity on the part of the teachers. Several of the young people who sat or had sat on the school council also had experience of the authorities’ own schemes for co-determination such as youth councils and local area youth councils. One spoke of how the youth council he sat on had put forward a request to increase the number of buses on a popular route, which was ultimately approved. However, most experiences were negative. The general perception was, as was the case for many other school council representatives, that there was a disparity between participation and real influence:

“We get a pat on the shoulder from the politicians. ‘How clever you are,’ you know? I don’t mean that we should get to decide absolutely everything. But there’s a difference between being heard and something actually happening.”

Girl, 16

Since none of the CRC’s articles give young people the opportunity to make their own decisions, in many cases adults’ attitudes will determine the influence of children and young people. These attitudes were often described as top-down, without adequate recognition of the young people’s wishes and needs:

“Youth councils must have real co-determination. They are not Lilliputian!”

Girl, 16

Some young people found that being invited to forums for co-determination where they felt they had very few opportunities for co-determination was actually provocative. The most common

³ Børhaug (2007).

perception, both with regard to co-determination at school and in the authorities' own schemes, was that in most cases young people were reduced to a consultative body with no real ability to influence decisions.



Kaja, 6

Co-determination in leisure time

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's general comment (no. 12) stresses the role of the family as an important starting point in promoting children's participation and rights to express themselves freely.⁴ Almost all the young people interviewed found their parents to be responsive and found their home to be a place where they could be part of decisions regarding things they felt were important. The youngest highlighted what clothes they could wear, what they could eat for dinner, and the activities they could do in their leisure time as important decisions that they were involved in. Among the young people from lower secondary schools and the participating grade of upper secondary schools, dinner, television programmes, leisure activities, and friends were cited as choices that they could largely decide for themselves. Some of the older young people felt that "good discussions around the dinner table" in which no topic was stupid and everything was discussed on an equal basis were a democratic activity. Young people from a non-Western background differed on this, however. One of the girls described her relationship with her parents and how this differed from Norwegian family relationships:

"It's as if Norwegians can say what they want to their parents. They dare to say anything. But not for those of us who think of our reputation. That this will reflect on the

⁴ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009).

family's reputation. But they're completely open. Not all of them though. I'm not like that. I show respect to my parents. They're the ones who decide."

Girl, 16

The girls described a family situation in which the family rules were somewhat stricter for them than for boys with the same background, and generally much stricter than for their Norwegian peers, regardless of gender. This included the time they had to be home by, sleepovers with friends and, as quoted above, the way in which they could speak to their parents. These circumstances were, however, not portrayed as something unusually restrictive but as part of their everyday life. Showing respect for their family was something they held in high esteem. And the way the family stuck together across generations was something they expressed pride in.

Sports clubs and youth clubs were also highlighted as democratic arenas. According to the young people, collaboration and collective team performance in certain sports created a sense of equality. Some participants in the youth consultation also explained how the internet and social media served as digital meeting places. A high degree of web interaction, as well as a wide range of user-friendly social media, made it easy for them to participate in a digitalised public sphere. Despite the enthusiasm they expressed in being able to participate in social communities and to influence online discussions, they were very concerned about the way freedom of expression was being abused in some cases:

"The internet is a double-sided coin. You can use it to express your opinion. But on the other hand, almost anything you post can lead to death threats."

Boy, 14

"The internet is very good too. Many people don't use it correctly, but you have to be there. Everyone's there."

Girl, 15

The perception of online participation as a double-edged sword was typical of the young people who took part in the youth consultation. Social media was described as a community that was important to be part of, since it was there that many had made new friends and acquaintances. It was also perceived as a place where it was easy to give visibility to one's concerns. Yet this visibility was also perceived as problematic since opinions could easily be shared with more people than one has control over, and because it was difficult to take things back once they were published. Generally speaking, they perceived internet democracy as being fragile and in constant danger of being undermined by participants who shared subjective and hateful comments. Consequently, out of fear of personal attack, several took a step back from active participation in social media and other online forums from time to time.

Giving and receiving information

Article 13 of the CRC is about the entitlement of all children to receive and convey all kinds of information and ideas. Without adequate information, it is difficult for a young person to voice their opinion about something or to make informed decisions. Adults have a responsibility to provide this information. In this way, adults can help to make young people aware of their rights and, equally as important, make those around them treat them with respect and show understanding. One of the young people subject to intervention by the Norwegian Child Welfare Service described it like this:

“I wish that people knew more about it. Nowadays it seems that people believe that if a child has done something or other, that it’s the child who has been challenging, not the parents who have done something wrong. (...) I think it would have been good at lower secondary school if part of the curriculum had dealt with child welfare services, foster homes, and things like that, but it didn’t. It’s not part of the curriculum at all, and no one talks about it. People don’t know anything about it.”

Girl, 16

The girl thought it was unfair that some people perceived it as being her fault that the Norwegian Child Welfare Service had moved her out of the home. Just as with young people with a disability, she felt that such prejudices had to be broken down by informing the population in general. With the exception of the very youngest participants, the descriptions of a day-to-day life in which a lack of knowledge among key adults made life difficult were shared by all focus groups. In some cases, this led to the young people not getting the information they needed to make sound, well-informed decisions. For others it resulted in adults failing to make sound, well-informed decisions on their behalf. Victims of bullying, for example, agreed that many teachers probably knew about bullying in a theoretical sense. But they were adamant that the teachers they had met lacked the practical knowledge necessary to stop and prevent bullying. They saw this as a major problem. According to victims of bullying, practical knowledge about bullying must be included more widely in basic teacher training, and efforts to prevent bullying must be co-ordinated across subjects. Challenges related to a lack of knowledge and co-ordination of information were also cited by young people with a disability. Article 23 of the CRC states that children with a disability have a particular entitlement to information adapted for them so as to promote development and inclusion – a right that they feel is not always adhered to. One of the young people described the help he received from the public health service as follows:

“I feel that I have a relatively good overview of what’s available and what can be used. But I feel that public information about what’s available and what can be used is very poor. I was paralysed four years ago. We asked and there were all sorts of examinations. No one found out what it was. We were just told, ‘Sorry, there’s nothing more we can do here at the hospital. You’ll have to sort things out yourselves.’ And we spent six months searching for treatment until we found something that got me up on my feet again. There has to be a lot more readily available public information. At the moment this is sorely lacking.”

Boy, 17

The experiences shared by young people with a disability varied depending on where in the country they had sought help, the health-care services they talked about, and how old they were at the time. A 17-year-old girl with osteoarthritis waxed lyrical about the expertise of a doctor she visited in Oslo, while describing the doctors she usually visited in her home town as “useless”. Although some participants had good experiences, the general impression was that they often faced a badly co-ordinated and unresponsive support system. This was a source of great frustration among young people with a disability. Some also explained that they had largely acquired their knowledge about their own disability and related rights off their own back. They saw it as highly reprehensible that doctors, teachers, nurses, and other relevant people so widely lacked essential information about disabilities in general, and some diagnoses in particular. A 17-year-old girl with dyslexia explained, clearly frustrated, how she repeatedly had to take the initiative herself to teach the school’s staff about her own diagnosis. A girl with spina bifida

received a lot of useful assistance from a lower secondary school nurse, despite the lack of knowledge among teachers. However, this was not a story shared by many, not because school nurses always lacked the necessary knowledge, but because they very often lacked the necessary time. Stories of overstretched school nurses were typical of both the youth consultation and the focus groups for young people with a disability.



Fredrik Mathias, 7

For other participants, it wasn't always a lack of knowledge among people with authority that made co-determination difficult. For young people subject to intervention by the Norwegian Child Welfare Service, the challenge seemed to be staff who rarely thought it important to share and include key information. This in turn resulted in effective, established routines for co-determination failing to materialise. As stated in the Norwegian Child Welfare Act, children aged seven and over and younger children who are able to voice their own opinions must be given information and an opportunity to respond with regard to decisions concerning them. Not everyone feels that this right is being adhered to. The following conversation took place in connection with the question of whether they felt they had enough information about their own affairs:

"I was five when I was moved into an emergency home. I was seven before I moved. I never really found out why until I was 10. It was then that I found out the condition my mum was in. (...) I was angry that I'd not been told about this earlier. I didn't believe it. I remember that I found out while sitting in the office. I remember this lady saying, 'Well, your mother is a drug addict' and blah blah blah. I just thought, 'Huh?!' Sat in the car on the way home, I asked my foster mother, 'Is it true that my mum is a drug addict?' 'Yes, it is,' she said. That's when I realised. No one had said anything about it to me."

"Do you feel that you have an overview of what's being done and said in your case?"

"I haven't a clue. I don't feel I have any control at all. They don't consider me enough of an adult to tell me. I began reading the folder about my situation. But because I was angry on the day I read it, my foster father and social worker clearly talked about it and decided that, 'No, she won't be allowed to read any more of this folder until she has moved.' (...) They didn't take me into account. Then my social worker spoke to them at home, which they shouldn't have done. Not to the extent that they did."

"For your information. They are not allowed to deny you access to the folder once you have turned 15."

"No, they haven't. I took up this thing with the folder when I was 16. I said, 'Right, now it's time to do something about this.' But I didn't get to read it until January, 18 months after my 15th birthday. They didn't tell me that I could read it once I turned 15. They just waited for me to do something about it myself."

"Do you have a person of trust?"

"What's that?"⁵

Girl, 16

The way in which important information was first withheld and the way in which it was then conveyed were perceived as both incomprehensible and insensitive. The girl had a general feeling of a lack of respect on the part of many at the Norwegian Child Welfare Service. In addition, she found it deeply unfair that the Norwegian Child Welfare Service's justifications – such as her temper or young age – for not granting her some rights were not applicable. The Norwegian Child Welfare Service's procedures for sharing information on the one hand, and including children's opinions on the other, were perceived as arbitrary by all the young people subject to intervention by the Norwegian Child Welfare Service. The information they received from the Norwegian Child Welfare Service was often inadequate or shared so late that the decision could not be influenced. In some cases, key information was not shared at all. One of the participants also commented that, in some cases, the Norwegian Child Welfare Service shared too much information with too many people, especially in connection with right of access. She found it unfair that this right was being exercised in a way that, according to her, too often favoured disclosure at the expense of confidentiality.

Co-determination is not just about receiving information. Children must also be given the opportunity to provide information – information that must be taken into account when decisions are made. Reports were consistently negative in this regard as well. One of the young people who lived in a foster home said:

"I'm listened to in one way or another, but they don't take what I say into account. The adults around me just do as they want. To hell with what I think and feel about it. (...) The Norwegian Child Welfare Service hasn't listened to me at all. I told them directly that I wanted to move. I can't stay there. I won't stay there. I can't stand it. They just said that I had to hold out until I was 18. They didn't bother to do anything about it. I made tens of thousands of suggestions. They even said themselves that where I was

⁵ A person of trust must serve as a safe adult, prevent rights from being breached, and ensure that the child is given the opportunity to voice their opinion about their own child welfare case. Under the Norwegian Child Welfare Act, the child must be informed of this arrangement as early as possible.

living wasn't good. But still they didn't move me. I can't remember ever being listened to in my life. Not properly."

Girl, 16

The girl felt she was never taken seriously. Dialogue with the Norwegian Child Welfare Service was perceived as problematic because, according to the girl, there was a clear imbalance of power between her alone on one side, and a huge apparatus of adult decision-makers on the other. In meetings with a child welfare officer who repeatedly seemed to make important decisions off their own back, the girl felt powerless. This resulted in a high degree of mistrust in several members of child welfare staff.

For unaccompanied minors seeking asylum, the Norwegian Child Welfare Act only applies to those aged under 15. The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration assumes responsibility once they have turned 15. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child wrote in its observations to the Norwegian authorities in 2010 that they were "concerned about" this distinction because it is "(...) leaving older children with reduced assistance".⁶ On the question of whether they were aware of what they were entitled to, one of the boys answered:

"No, we don't know what rights we have. Maybe if we knew what rights we had, we could more easily say, 'No, this isn't allowed' or 'We don't have this right.' But we don't know. (...) We came across the Mediterranean. Most came from Italy. They took fingerprints. But we don't want to live in Italy. If we're sent back to Italy after a year...there we've no right to go to school, we have no rights. Why, when we came to Norway? Why? Do you have information on the Dublin agreement? We need information."

Boy, 17

These young people lacked the protection, care, and guidance of their parents, and many reported experiences of violence and conflict in their home countries. Together with a lack of understanding of the Norwegian language and culture, this contributed to a general feeling of desperation and powerlessness. These times of uncertainty meant that easy access to channels where they could give and receive information was perceived as especially important. For the young people who took part in the focus group interview, there were two things that they wanted more information about: Norwegian culture and society, and the status of their asylum application and resettlement situation. The young people were clearly frustrated at how little they knew about their own lives, and how little influence they had.

"We sometimes feel that we can't decide anything. That makes us sad. (...) When I arrived here, I thought I'd get everything I needed, like getting an interview quickly, accommodation, and making progress at school. We're on our own. We have no one here. I don't know anything."

Boy, 16

The need for information emerged as being paramount. No one who took part in the focus group interview had heard of the CRC, and knowledge about their rights was very limited. They found it difficult to make demands without the necessary knowledge. Although the young people described their contact with many members of staff as being good, they also felt that there was a

⁶ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2010).

lack of forums for talking about their situation and life at the reception centre. As they perceived it, there were very few opportunities for sharing their feelings and thoughts with other adults. This was a source of considerable frustration.

With the exception of two young people, all participants were dissatisfied with the guardians⁷ they had been assigned. One girl told the following story:

“I have a guardian. I’ve lived in the reception centre for six months. She only came once during these six months. Now I’ve got a residence permit. And then the guardian had to help me with a passport and travel documents and residence card. We travelled to the town together. There were other girls from different countries as well. She was a little... we could see from her face that she didn’t like foreigners. We were at a restaurant. The girls sat together. But she sat further away, she wouldn’t sit with us. We felt very let down. The food wasn’t important. The main thing was that we could sit all together and talk.”

Girl, 17

The guardian should act as someone who gives the asylum seeker information, who listens to what the young person has to say, and ensures that their rights are safeguarded. Whether the right of asylum seekers to be heard is practised or not therefore hinges on the degree of monitoring by guardians. Many spoke of guardians who hardly ever visited, and who appeared to be disinterested or uncaring when they met. They were hurt by this rejection from someone who was supposed to look after their interests. The guardians were usually described as Norwegians who the young people felt they had little in common with. Consequently they requested guardians who were more familiar with their situation:

“We would like guardians of different nationalities. They don’t have to be from Norway. They could be from another country. Those who have gone through difficult times understand us better and can help us. Some of them work hard. But some just work as guardians – they don’t like foreigners.”

Boy, 16

The young people in the focus group also felt that age differences between the guardians and themselves played a role. They all agreed that younger guardians from non-Western immigrant backgrounds would make life easier. In their eyes, this would enable close dialogue with safe adult figures who not only represented Norwegian adult society but also shared some of the experiences and stories of these young people. In reality, there were few aspects of life at the reception centre that the young people felt they had the opportunity to influence. Several mentioned that opportunities to practise their religion and to attend church are a positive element in their lives. Access to the internet and television channels where the boys could watch football was also a matter that concerned them and that they had a degree of influence over.

⁷ Until the child receives a decision regarding their settlement, this person is called a “representative”. After a decision has been made regarding settlement, the word “guardian” is used, although in practice this may be the same person. The interpreter consistently used “guardian”, although in many cases these were actually representatives. The interviews never investigated whether the young people had received a settlement decision. So, for simplicity, we have used “guardian”.

5 Discrimination and bullying

“I’m a 14-year-old boy who has a crush on a boy in another class and one girl in my class. I told the person I trust the most and the boy I like that I’m bisexual (I sent a message by accident), but the boys in my class joke too much, calling people gay and things like that, so I’m scared to come out to my class. What should I do?”

Young person, ung.no

The young people who had been bullied felt that their school’s ability to stop and prevent bullying was very poor.

Young people from a non-Western minority background and Sámi background reported that they often feel they are faced with prejudices.

Young people who did not identify as being heterosexual reported that they found their school’s sex education to be very inadequate.

Bullying at school

Bullying is defined as repeated acts by one or more people with the conscious desire to cause discomfort. The physical and/or mental strength ratio is usually skewed.⁸ There are many reasons why children and young people are bullied. The young people that Bufdir spoke with had been bullied because they have a disability. Two of the boys were brothers. Both had a hearing impairment and used implants. One was dyslexic. Children with a disability are especially vulnerable with regard to social inclusion among their peers.⁹ The young people who took part in the focus group had been bullied throughout primary school. Bullying began as early as kindergarten for one of the boys:

“I was excluded. I wasn’t exactly welcome. As early as kindergarten. (...) I wasn’t allowed to take part in the games. They went out before me, and called me names. My name is [...], but they called me other things. It was very hurtful at the time, because I wasn’t the person they said I was.”

Boy, 15

The experience of being socially excluded was painful. This exclusion continued into primary school. Here too bullying was indirect, which made it difficult for the teacher to notice:

⁸ NOU (2015: 2).

⁹ Wendelborg and Paulsen (2014).

Article 2 – Non-discrimination

States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child’s or his or her parent’s or legal guardian’s race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.

Quantitative findings

- Nearly 5% of pupils surveyed in Elevundersøkelsen have had adults at their school make fun of them or tease them when they were sad.*
- Depending on the type of incident, between 30% and 50% of pupils responded that not one adult at their school knew what to do while the incident was unfolding.*
- 6% said that they are subjected to harassment, threats, or exclusion at least every two weeks.**
- 3% are subject to bullying either online or on their mobile at least every two weeks.**
- Of the young people from the very lowest socio-economic backgrounds, almost 10% are bullied at least once every two weeks. This figure is almost twice as high as for those from the highest socio-economic background.***

Sources: *Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research (2015), **Nova (2015), **Nova (2016).

“Early on in school, I wasn’t allowed to put my bag by the others’ bags. I had to put mine at the back of the classroom. The pupils decided who could have their bags where. The teacher didn’t really see this as bullying. They just saw it as ‘he has his bag there, and the others have their bags there.’ (...) I maybe wouldn’t have seen it as bullying either in their shoes. But I do see it as such. As being excluded. That amounts to exclusion.”

Boy, 15

The boys had been subjected to social isolation on two fronts. Firstly, they experienced active isolation from a minority who were bullying. Secondly, they were subjected to passive isolation by the majority who were not bullying, yet who still never gave the impression that they were bothered. All the boys reported that they were given identities that they didn’t associate themselves with and that were then used to justify the bullying. The boy with dyslexia felt no less smart than the others. And although two of the boys were born with a hearing impairment, neither found their lives to be limited as a result. They found that bullying deprived them of the opportunity to be who they felt they were – like the others. This was, as the boy with dyslexia pointed out, “hurtful”. The boys also reported that the teachers were hardly ever aware that bullying was taking place, and if they were aware, then they didn’t consider it to be bullying. The victims of bullying cited group work and team selection during PE classes as examples of particularly difficult situations. In these situations, the pupils were free to choose who they wanted to work with, and in this way demonstrate who they liked and who they did not like. Such situations unfolded with both pupils and teachers present. This was especially problematic, because everyone apart from the teacher seemed to know that the pupils’ choices were an expression of indirect bullying. The fact that this took place right under the teacher’s nose, without them intervening, was perceived as an additional kick in the teeth. Even direct forms of bullying, such as verbal attacks and physical violence, could take place without the teachers being aware of this – especially when this took place outside the classroom:

“At the school I went to, I found that the teachers hated being on playground duty outside. They didn’t really like that. And that’s when bullying happens. Bullying happens outside during break time. They don’t see anything when they can hardly be bothered to go out. ‘Ok, we’ll stand in front of the ball games area,’ for example. Great for those kicking a ball around. But what about those in the corner behind the bins? That’s where I could get kicked and beaten. But there was no one standing there keeping a lookout. I think many teachers see being outside as something negative. But that’s where the teachers need to be.”

Boy, 15

Time after time they felt that the adults who could have prevented the bullying from continuing failed them. The boys felt that they never got the help they needed. In their eyes, the schools had been either unaware of what was happening or unsure of how to deal with it, or had done too little, too late. All three were convinced that many teachers deliberately chose to turn a blind eye to some of the bullying for fear of having to deal with a difficult situation in a satisfactory manner. In some cases the teacher had even been one of the bullies:

“I’ve been bullied by a teacher. An older teacher. He branded all dyslexics as stupid. He called me stupid. Demanding that I just sit there and cram and cram and cram. Until I could finally read and do maths. He did that for a while. But eventually he gave up. I tried to learn maths, but then he gave me maths problems that were too simple.”

“And did he do this in front of everyone?”

“Yes, in front of the whole class. So I ended up getting really behind in maths. I didn’t enjoy it. I no longer enjoyed school, where I was called stupid by a teacher who should have been a clever, intelligent role model for us.”

Boy, 15

Teachers have a legal obligation to promote a good psychosocial school environment, and have a particular responsibility to act as a role model for social interaction at school. This is why the experience of unhappiness and injustice is so intense. When the teacher then gave the pupil tasks that increased the distance with the rest of the class, the feeling of isolation became especially strong.



Mathias, 6

Everyone in the focus group had experience of staff who did not deal with incidents or dismissed them as usual playing. Reports of teachers who wanted to help but did not know how were also common. Some found that bullying became worse after the school tried to deal with the problem. When one of the young people was asked why he hadn’t told his teachers at the lower secondary school about the bullying, he answered:

“It’s easy to be bullied because of snitching and things like that. Because the teacher then says who told them. (...) They actually say to the bully ‘Why did you hit him and him?’ They say our names. And then they [the bullies] put two and two together.”

Boy, 17

The risk of being labelled a snitch and/or the school dealing with the matter too leniently, thus making bullying seem more attractive, made all the boys hesitant about speaking up. For one

who was subjected to face-to-face bullying in the playground, he finally involved the teacher. However, the bullying didn't end completely:

"First we talked with the school and stuff. After that no one dared to bully at school. But then it moved online, because it's a lot easier, you know? Every morning I'd wake up to nasty words. If I posted a picture, there would always be horrible comments. The first thing I'd see was [nasty comments] about me. Them threatening me. And the last thing I'd see before I went to bed was [nasty comments]. It would happen at school too, on my mobile. (...) But it wasn't just that. The bullies would call their best friends and say things like 'Those two aren't cool, they're ugly. We'll sort them out.' Then they started bullying us online too."

Boy, 17

The arena for bullying had switched from the playground to social media. This meant that bullying was no longer bound by the physical or temporal boundaries of the school, and could be inflicted anywhere, any time. The feeling of having no escape was described as almost unbearable. This was further complicated for the two brothers by the fact that they did not want to tell their parents about what was happening:

"I was nervous to go home, because Mum and Dad would ask if I'd had a good day and things like that. So I'd lie to them. (...) They just want the best for you. I didn't want them to know and think they were bad parents. So I'd dread the journey to school, the journey home, and coming home."

Boy, 17

The brothers did not want their parents to be upset and feel inadequate, so they decided not to tell them about the bullying. In addition to the fear of being bullied on the way to and from school, their parents' daily question about how their day at school had been was something they found difficult. Fortunately the two boys had one another for support. Yet they still felt alone due to a problem they could not solve on their own because they did not want their parents to find out, lacked close friends, and found their teachers to be incapable of putting a stop to the bullying.

Being seen as different

With regard to whether young people from immigrant backgrounds have experienced racism, research from NOVA has shown that the majority answer "rarely" or "never".¹⁰ And the more serious the type of racism, the greater this majority becomes. The stories that were shared in the focus groups largely mirror NOVA's findings. There were three unaccompanied minors seeking asylum who had experienced racially motivated violence. But in the focus group for young people from non-Western immigrant backgrounds, there were none who answered "yes" when first asked if they had ever been subjected to racism. Instead they started by telling many stories of how they themselves used words like "nigger" and "onion" regarding friends from an immigrant background. This was not ill-meant, and was probably used as a strategy to detoxify terms that, in other contexts, could be used more maliciously. However, when these young people eventually became involved in more everyday situations, a number of stories emerged about their experiences of racism. One of the incidents was described like this:

¹⁰ Øia and Vestel (2007).

“Someone had let off some sort of fireworks in the classroom. The teacher came in at once: ‘It was you who did it, I saw it.’ But I was in the computer room. It wasn’t even the same place. I said, ‘But I didn’t do it.’ And so we went up to the office and he said, ‘He let off fireworks in the classroom, he must be expelled.’ But then after a few hours, the one who did it came and said, ‘I did it, not him.’ (...) I changed classes because I didn’t want him as a teacher. I was the only dark-skinned person in the class. That was why he thought I did it. It’s mostly boys who are caught, dark boys. (...) If something goes wrong, they go straight to the foreigners.”

Boy, 16

The boy felt that the teachers always blamed dark-skinned pupils when someone in the class had done something wrong. Because he was the only dark-skinned pupil in the class, he was also alone in his role as the class scapegoat. This feeling of being alone without others with whom to share the burden ultimately made him switch class. As the boy said, it was not just because of the colour of his skin that he was discriminated against. He also claims that the fact that he was a boy affected his teacher’s actions. The experience of being unfairly treated seemed to be compounded by the fact that he was discriminated against for multiple reasons at the same time.¹¹

One of the other boys who took part in the interview had witnessed what he perceived as racism from the police:

“I wasn’t really part of it, but I was there. There were two drunk young people. They both had knives, and they were fighting. So when the police came, they let the Norwegian be and took the foreigner. He was dark. So they took him. And this was the police! The Norwegian ran away. There were four police officers who went for the dark guy, and they just let the other guy run. They thought that he was the least dangerous.”

Boy, 16

Such episodes, where public officials subjected the young people to what they perceived as racism, stood out as especially bad. This was due to the special responsibility these adults had for treating all young people equally and the unequal balance of power between them. Although they were aware of the existence of structural racism in Norway – the labour market was mentioned – it was the actions of individuals that made up the basis of the experiences of the young people taking part in the focus group. The action most frequently mentioned in discussions on racism was the way in which they were looked at. Experiences of what they perceived as sceptical and condescending looks from random adults, often in combination with small actions that further expressed this scepticism, were common. One of the boys described how an everyday meeting with a Norwegian in public could play out:

“I’m walking along the street. And then as soon as I come alongside them, they grab their bag. And they look at me. They think I want to steal. They think we have different behaviour than them because we’re foreigners.”

Boy, 15

The girls had similar experiences. Experiences like this were typical:

¹¹ Such discrimination is referred to as multiple discrimination. See Heyerdahl (2012).

“People go past me if there’s space [on the subway]. It happens to girls too, girls wearing the hijab. They look at me strangely, at my clothes and stuff. Even if they want to sit, they choose to stand.”

Girl, 16

“I walked along the road. There were only Norwegians there. At that time, at least. Then there were a mother, father, and child who gave me such a nasty look. And I thought, ‘Huh, what have I done? I’m an ordinary human being.’”

Girl, 16

Such looks and actions were perceived as attempts to distance those who did not fit in with Norwegian society. In the young people’s eyes, it was unfair to be labelled negatively when they saw themselves as “ordinary people”. The young people agreed that the incidents with the teacher and the police were clearly unfair violations. Looks, old ladies clutching their bags, and people who refuse to stand or sit next to these young people on the subway were, however, not serious incidents. On the question of whether they felt such incidents were an expression of racism, one of the young people replied: “Yes, but they’re only looks. We’re used to it. It’s normal.” The severity was too small and the occurrence too frequent for this to be interpreted as an unreserved expression of racism. One of the young people from a Sámi background had also had experiences of looks:

“We’re seen as different. Not much. But people have it in the back of their minds. You know, the looks you get when speaking Sámi around other people. You see that they’re looking at you for just a second. Not badly, but just that ‘you’re different’ kind of a look. It’s odd that it’s still like this when our languages are equal.”

Girl, 17



Øyvind, 6

Unlike the young people from an immigrant background, she found the looks to be more curious than sceptical. She was still disappointed that the people “(...) had never heard a single word of Sámi, even in 2016”. It was not the bemused looks themselves that she reacted to, but rather what the listeners’ eyes were expressing. For her, this was confirmation of the alienation of Sámi culture in Norwegian society. She called for greater visibility of Sámi culture in Norwegian media and popular culture, so as to increase knowledge of the Sámi people among the majority of the population. As she understood it, there were still many ill-informed prejudices, especially among young people in southern Norway:

“Once we went on a school trip to Germany with a class from Oslo. And they asked me quite seriously if I’d ever seen an iPhone or eaten tacos. They were deadly serious about it. And then you just feel...well... .”

Girl, 17

She was proud of her Sámi background, but found it challenging to face the majority of society as Sámi because the response often resulted in a sense of inferiority and exclusion. Since she was half Norwegian and half Sámi, on some occasions she chose not to disclose her Sámi identity and emphasised her Norwegian identity instead. But the feeling of being Sámi, or Norwegian, was still not something that she could put to one side just like that. It made her feel “split”:

“When I’m in Oslo, I feel that I look Sámi, that everyone can tell that I’m Sámi and that I really, really stand out. I feel very Sámi when there are a lot of Norwegian people around me. I feel that I have something they don’t – a language, a culture, and experience. But if I’m in Kautokeino or it’s the Sámi national day, or I’m somewhere where there are lots of Sámi people, I suddenly feel like a Norwegian. I feel then that my Norwegian side is very visible, that people can see that I’m not quite Sámi, that I’m part Norwegian too. And it does something to a person when you constantly feel that you’re a bit different. You feel split; a person who’s caught in the middle. Where do I belong then?”

Girl, 17

In many situations where she was evidently like everyone else, she felt very different. In many cases the opposite was true for young people from a non-Western, immigrant background who, because of their skin colour and clothing, could not hide their background. They found that those around them looked at them as representatives of the outside, although they themselves felt part of the inside. The Sámi girl found that those around her often perceived her as part of the inside, but she felt that she was outside of the community. This meant that the young people, who all felt Norwegian as well as Sámi, Kurdish, Somali, or Pakistani, occasionally found that there was a lack of arenas in which they felt they fitted. In both cases, they understood this perceived distance between inside and outside to be a result of the prejudices and lack of knowledge of those around them.

Other marginalised young people

Many young people experience marginalisation in various areas. This may be due to gender, age, skin colour, religion, or financial status. Issues related to sexuality are also subject to discrimination. Some of the young people who took part in the consultation felt that it should be easier to come forward as having a different sexual orientation or gender identity. They found it “unfair” that, as one of them pointed out, “boys and girls can kiss on the bus, but if two boys do it,

or two girls, everyone gives them a nasty look.” The expectation that one should be heterosexual makes many children and young people of a different sexual orientation or gender expression reluctant to “come out”. Many of the young people who spoke out speak of negative reactions from their family and peers.¹² Studies have shown that “gay” is one of the most common insults in Norwegian playgrounds.¹³ At the youth consultation, many young people called for schools to teach pupils about the multitude of sexual orientations, gender expressions, and gender identities to a greater extent than currently. In this way, it will be easier to live freely and openly, and in harmony with one’s own identity. These two quotes sum things up well:

“As a homosexual I had to search Google to find out what ‘homosexuality’ is in order to get more information on something we should be taught about at school. This showed me how sex education is at some Norwegian schools.”

“If gays and lesbians are to avoid being bullied, more information about LGBT issues, such as homosexuality, bisexuality, transsexuality, pansexuality, asexuality,¹⁴ etc., must be given at school. This must be in conjunction with a functioning sex education programme throughout Norway, in both urban and rural areas.”

Boy, 17

The young people at the youth consultation generally perceived the school’s task of providing sex education as a failure and misjudged. “It’s not enough,” said one of the young people, “just to put a condom on a plastic penis.” The young people felt that sex education which succeeded in normalising the entire spectrum of orientations and gender expressions would make it easier for those who did not identify themselves with being heterosexual to put their own sexual and gender-related preferences into words. It would also prevent negative attitudes among young people more generally. The boy quoted above found his school’s inadequate efforts in this field to be particularly serious. He described sexuality as an important aspect of young people’s identities – something that they were passionate about and talked a lot about. Consequently he found the experience of not fitting in with the “normal”, heterosexual understanding of sexual identity and orientation to be difficult. This is precisely why he thought it was important for schools to develop sex education that was able to blur the distinctions between “normal” and “abnormal”.

A gender identity that represents a departure from what is considered normal becomes especially challenging if one feels marginalised in other areas as well. Research has shown that gays and lesbians from an immigrant or Sámi background are especially at risk of violence and harassment in their own environment.¹⁵ There are currently very few studies on the discrimination against children and young people in the Sámi population and among national minorities. Finns (kvener), Forest Finns (skogfinner), Jews, Gypsies, and Roma are considered national minorities in Norway. Some reports have given examples of discrimination against Sámi children due to their ethnic affiliation. Many end up ashamed of their ethnicity because they perceive society at large to be sceptical of the Sámi people and culture. Consequently these children grow up with the

¹² Save the Children Norway, LLH and Skeiv ungdom (2016).

¹³ Slåtten, Anderssen and Holsen (2008).

¹⁴ “Pansexuality means feeling attraction and love regardless of the other person’s gender. (...) Asexuality means an absence of sexual attraction and/or absence of sexual desire.” For more definitions (in Norwegian), please visit:

https://www.bufdir.no/lhbt/lhbt_ordlista/

¹⁵ Elgvin, Bue and Grønningsæter (2014).

understanding that they are not Norwegian, and that being Sámi they are inferior.¹⁶ With regard to Norwegian Jews, the Center for Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities' report *Antisemittisme i Norge?* (Antisemitism in Norway?) found that anti-Semitism is highest among young people.¹⁷ A 2002 school project called *Taterfolket fra barn til voksen* (Gypsies from childhood to adulthood), initiated by Gypsies themselves, concluded that school education was poorly adapted for Gypsy children and that this could help to account for the high dropout rate in this cohort of pupils.¹⁸ Reports from the Norwegian equality and anti-discrimination ombudsman, among others, have shed light on how many Roma children face challenges in the school system and public services. A poorly adapted primary and lower secondary school and parents deprived of custody by the Norwegian Child Welfare Service were cited as being especially problematic.¹⁹



Elida, 6

¹⁶ Høgmo (2005) in Midtbøen and Lidén (2015).

¹⁷ The Center for Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities (2012).

¹⁸ National Association of Gypsies, Dronning Mauds Minne and Høgskolen i Sør-Trøndelag (2002).

¹⁹ Midtbøen and Lidén (2015).

6 Health and security

"I'm so depressed. I can't be alone without starting to cry. I don't find pleasure in things that always used to make me happy. I don't want to live any more because I don't see any point in living, except that I'd leave my family behind if I kill myself. I have constant negative thoughts about myself."

Young person, ung.no

Young people in wheelchairs often reported that they felt lonely.

Young people who had been bullied reported that they struggled with anxiety. Unaccompanied minors seeking asylum described the uncertainty regarding their asylum application as very stressful.

The children and young people explained how they need their families and good friends to feel secure.

Physical and mental health

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines good health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."²⁰

The general impression given both during the consultation and in the focus groups was that most were physically active and mostly ate healthily. In addition to taking part in various sporting activities, many also went to the gym. Two focus group participants studied health sciences, and the general perception was that good nutrition and physique were important and so were something they took seriously. But as one of the young people said: "Good health isn't just about working out." There was a much greater variation in the young people's mental health. Primary school pupils seemed happy and satisfied with their lives, as did young people from a non-Western, immigrant background. In all the other focus groups, there were several stories about mental health problems. When asked if she thought her health was good, one of the girls from the focus group for children subject to intervention by the Norwegian Child Welfare Service said:

"My physical health isn't great on account of what I eat. But mental health is more important for me. And that's not great all the time either. It's very up and down to tell the truth. (...) As a young person, there's a lot of

²⁰ WHO (2016)

<http://www.who.int/trade/glossary/story046/en/>

Article 27 – Adequate standard of living

1. States Parties recognise the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.

2. The parent(s) or others responsible for the child have the primary responsibility to secure, within their abilities and financial capacities, the conditions of living necessary for the child's development.

Quantitative findings

- 70% of young people say that they are "somewhat" or "very" happy with their own health.**
- Stress and anxiety are the most common mental health problems in young people. More than 30% feel that everything is a struggle, or that they worry too much.**
- Physical and mental health are interrelated. Of those who suffer most from mental health problems, almost 40% also have physical health problems on a daily basis.**
- Almost 25% of tenth grade pupils and those at upper secondary school show signs of depression.**
- Half of girls are somewhat or very satisfied with how they look, compared with 70% of boys.**
- Young people from a poor socio-economic background are generally less satisfied with themselves and their own health, use more medicines, and have more physical ailments than young people from a higher social strata.***

Sources: **Nova 2015 and ***Nova 2016

pressure in terms of how you look. If you don't do something you get [critical] comments or looks, and so you feel self-conscious. But the experiences I've had mean that I have some thoughts that can also make me feel pretty down."

Girl, 16

She found it difficult to constantly have to live up to the expectation that she should look pretty, wear the right clothes and not stand out. Critical looks and comments from those at school with the power to define could destroy her confidence. In addition, she battled with her thoughts about a difficult childhood. As she perceived it, the adults she tried to trust in failed her. The lack of care she received from an early age and from the Norwegian Child Welfare Service's employees resulted in her developing a general scepticism of adults. All of this contributed to a sense of sadness and an existence that was very "up and down".

In the focus group for young people with a disability, stories of loneliness were widespread, especially for the three participants in a wheelchair:

"My childhood and youth haven't been all that easy. I almost wasn't allowed to be a child. I just had adults around me all the time and spent a lot of time in hospitals."

Girl, 17

"I have just about everything I could wish for, apart from being able to talk with others."

Girl, 17

"I've struggled with being social since I left primary school. As I say to my best friend, my closest friend is my sofa."

Boy, 16

They likened living a childhood without peers to speak and play with to being denied the chance to be a child. Although the first girl was very happy with the direction in which her life had been going since she started upper secondary school, she described long periods in her childhood where she hardly socialised with others her age. For the other two, socialising with others continued to be a considerable challenge and a great loss. The lack of friends was something they thought a lot about. In a life where they felt that they were in control of most things and had almost everything they needed, the feeling of social isolation was the most painful.

Living in insecurity

Being in good health is also about "feeling secure in your thoughts", as one young person put it. There are many different definitions of security. Psychologist Abraham Maslow, the man behind Maslow's hierarchy of needs, defined security as predictability, protection, and safety.²¹ These criteria were absent for victims of bullying. The young people had few or no adults they could speak to, and so had no one to give them the protection and safety they needed to feel secure. And inasmuch as these young people found their (school) life to be predictable, this was because bullying had become part of this predictability. "You could almost set your watch by when I was bullied," said one young person. This led to serious mental health problems:

²¹ Thorsen (2005).

"I think that bullying actually starts to be murder in one sense. It makes many people weak. I'm not saying that people who bully others kill them physically. But those who get bullied no longer feel worth anything any more. They just want away from it all and to start again. That's how I think. You don't want to live any more. That's what it's like to be bullied. It fills your mind, you can't think of anything else. Your mind says, 'I can't go on any longer.' You're exhausted. You can't go on any longer. You're mentally ill. Lots of thoughts."

Boy, 17

Pupils who are bullied often feel less valued.²² This sense of inferiority is not something you can leave at the school gate:

"I've not been bullied EVERY DAY; not 365 days of the year. But it nevertheless felt like they were bullying me every second, of every minute, of every hour. Of every day. Of every week. Of every year. Even when you're at home you feel like you're not free. You feel like you're still being bullied."

Boy, 17



Erik, 8

Although they wanted some relief, they found the sense of inferiority as something that was difficult to escape and which haunted them even in their sleep. Two of the boys continued to struggle with nightmares. When being bullied, the feeling was so consuming that they couldn't think about anything else. Systematic bullying over many years had ultimately deprived them of the belief that they were worth anything. Having one's self-confidence and self-image destroyed in this way was perceived almost as murder, because it meant losing the premise of being able to

²² NOU (2015: 2).

enjoy life. The fear of being bullied and told how little they were worth made it almost impossible to concentrate at school:

“The whole of primary school right through to seventh grade was just thrown away. I don’t remember a damn thing of what we were taught. I sat and shivered, and dreaded each and every break time. I thought about it a lot.”

Boy, 17

One of the boys described how the motivation to get up in the morning and still go to school felt like the result of an instinctive act of self-preservation:

“I never skipped school. That’s why I had to be strong in my mind and remember that I had many years ahead of me. It would soon be over. So I just put up with it.”

Boy, 17

The belief that bullying would one day end and that life would again be pleasurable got him through primary school. For one of them, however, life was close to coming to an all too early end when at the age of 11 he tried to take his own life. After the boys started upper secondary school, two of them at a special school for the hearing impaired, life improved considerably. Bullying was no longer such a major part of their lives. But many years of mental and physical violence had left deep scars. Aside from depression, the young people struggled with anxiety. One of the participants from the focus groups began therapy with a psychologist in primary school, but still continued to struggle with a serious social phobia which had arisen in connection with being bullied. Another described how he dreaded starting work because much of the way there was the same as when he used to go to school. Although he wasn’t afraid of being bullied again, he was scared of the memories it would evoke.

The unaccompanied minors seeking asylum also experienced insecurity. According to the report *Levekår for barn i asylsøkerfasen* (Living conditions for children in the asylum system), there is a higher incidence of mental health problems among children and young people living in reception centres than in the youth population in general.²³ In addition to the traumatic events in their home countries, uncertainty related to these young people’s future prospects in the country where they were seeking asylum contributed to this. Among those who took part in the focus group for unaccompanied minors seeking asylum, three out of a total of eleven participants were still waiting for a decision on their asylum application. The rest had been granted residence. One young person was about to enter his tenth month without a decision:

“I was the first one here. I finished my interview in Oslo before I came here. But I still haven’t heard back whether it’s a yes or a no. That was nine months ago. So it’s really difficult to think about it. (...) I have big problems now. I think about it so much. I’ve not had a decision. I have lots of problems. When I came here I never thought that it would be like this. I think about it all the time. I can’t sleep at night. It’s sad. Everyone has been granted residence, but not me. I’m alone.”

Boy, 16

When asked what it took to make them feel secure, one young person answered:

²³ Berg and Tronstad (2015).

“We have everything we need. We have an apartment. Everything. The only thing is having to wait. That’s difficult. I left a lot of difficult situations when I fled my home country. I didn’t think it would be like this in Norway. I came here seven months ago. I thought then that I was coming to a free country. But after seven months I’ve still not been interviewed. I’m just waiting, and waiting, and waiting. I go to school, but I think a lot about my residency. Will I stay in Norway or not? (...) It will be difficult if they say no after such a long time...even if they say yes. My mind is already almost destroyed. Quick decisions are really important.”

Boy, 17

Although these young people had “everything [they] need”, they lacked the certainty that their journey away from a difficult situation was over. The constant feeling of staying in a country on borrowed time meant that life was put on hold. This was something that drained them of energy, sleep, and motivation. As they saw it, it was a waste of time to go to a Norwegian school if they would then be sent back. All the young people stated that they had experienced long periods of waiting and little information in Norway, which was not what they had imagined. In many ways they felt that the difficult situations they had fled from in their home countries were also applicable in Norway, albeit in slightly different forms. The unresolved situation in Norway was therefore almost understood as part of the escape. To the question of what was needed for the young people to feel secure, all of them said that only a quick decision on their asylum application would give them security. The decision in itself, whether yes or no, was actually subordinate to getting a decision. It was the wait and unpredictability that created insecurity.

Who provides security?

To the question of what the children and young people associated with security, the answer was, with a few exceptions, always the same: having a family who cared about you, and friends you could trust and confide in. When two primary school pupils were asked what a secure and good upbringing meant to them, they responded as follows:

“That there’s no war outside. And that I have someone to trust that I can speak with about anything. It’s important to have someone you can rely on. If I was afraid of something, I could talk with Mum and Dad, and they could explain it to me. If it was my mum or dad that were making me afraid, I would have told my grandma and grandpa. (...) I think it’s unfair that it’s not like that in every country.”

Girl, 9

“Having friends around me who can help me when I need it. When I don’t have anyone to play with, they play with me.”

Girl, 9

Having safe family relationships and good friendships served as protection from fear and uncertainty, for example, and from being alone with no one to play with. Both those who had good relationships with their friends and family and those who didn’t agreed that close ties to safe adults and good friendships were important for feeling secure. This was true of the participants in the youth consultation and in all the focus groups. Friends and family made them feel secure, just as the absence of such persons contributed to a feeling of insecurity. The girl in the first quote clearly explained how lucky she felt, that she had someone she could seek the support of if she was finding things hard. In general, the primary school pupils felt a strong sense of justice and were very concerned about how unfair it was that not all children in the world grew up with good

friends and safe adult figures. The fact that some children didn't have anyone to play with at school was an example of something they found very problematic.



Josefine, 8

Playing with others was something some children got a lot of enjoyment from. The way in which the older young people looked after their friendships more took the form of developing common interests. One young person from the youth consultation described it like this:

"I feel secure when I'm with my friend. She's the only one who knows me well enough that we don't even have to say a word. She just gives me a look. She knows what I'm thinking. We can just sit and listen to music or watch a film. (...) Sometimes we can sit and chat on Facebook for the whole evening, and before we know it, it's one in the morning."

Girl, 16

The girl felt secure in having someone who really knew her and had the same interests as her. Several young people cited social media as an arena in which they could seek security among their friends and peers. They also pointed out that the large number of acquaintances that social media opened the door to brought a sense of security in a quantitative sense by way of "likes", especially on Instagram and Facebook. The more people who liked a picture of you on Instagram, for instance, the more secure you would feel that you, or at least the person you were pretending to be, were socially accepted. As one of the focus group participants said:

"Well, I know of girls who are completely Viggo [social outsiders] in reality. But when they post another selfie, or a picture of their dog or whatever, they get over 50 likes right away."

Boy, 16

An image that is popular in the virtual world does not necessarily mean that you are popular in the physical world. The internet is, as we have already mentioned, used to harass and bully. But the internet has also made it possible for some young people who would otherwise not get positive confirmation to turn to unknown people to satisfy their sense of belonging and social acceptance. Some bullying victims have used the same social media that was used to bully them in order to meet other victims of bullying to share experiences, to support one another, and to mobilise solidarity. One of the participants started the Facebook group *Oss mot mobbing* ("Fight bullying"), which at the time of writing had 6,258 likes.

7 Summary

The main impression from the youth consultation and focus groups was that most of the participants liked school. However, school life could be very challenging for young people with a disability. Reports of teachers who have yet to or who have failed to facilitate academic and social participation were typical. According to the young people, schools must acquire more knowledge about disabilities. This would make it easier for teachers and peers to focus on what these young people have in common with them rather than what makes them different, thus creating a more inclusive school environment.

All of the children and young people lived active lives. Sport was the most popular recreational activity. Many also enjoyed visiting youth clubs, especially because they found the youth club to be a place where they could decide on much of the activity content themselves. At school, however, many found there to be limited opportunities for deciding on and influencing content. The general impression was that co-determination schemes such as school councils and class meetings were often conducted merely to keep up appearances. The young people felt that, although they were largely listened to, their wishes had little impact. The same was true of authority schemes for co-determination such as youth councils and local area youth councils.

Apart from the very youngest participants, all of the focus group participants described a daily life marred by a lack of key knowledge among key adult figures. This sometimes led to the young people not getting the information they needed to influence their own lives in key areas. One such example was a girl subject to intervention by the Norwegian Child Welfare Service who could not remember having received information about the person-of-trust scheme. On other occasions, a lack of information among adults led to their inability to make sound decisions on behalf of the young people, such as in the case of teachers who did not know how to detect, deter, and prevent bullying.

Young people from non-Western, immigrant backgrounds and Sámi backgrounds had many experiences of coming up against the feeling that they did not belong, especially on account of their skin colour, their headgear, and their Sámi background. This meant that the young people occasionally experienced a lack of arenas where they felt included. Young people whose gender expression and orientation broke with perceived norms also came up against prejudices, and therefore called for better sex education at school.

Among the young people with a disability, those who used a wheelchair described a daily life with little contact with their peers. This made them feel lonely. The boys who had been bullied struggled a lot with anxiety while the bullying was ongoing. Two continued to struggle with nightmares, and one with social phobia. Unaccompanied minors seeking asylum clearly stated that the wait and uncertainty associated with their asylum application were mentally very stressful. The thought that they might be sent back to a country they had fled due to conflict and difficult conditions made it especially hard for them to motivate themselves and keep their spirits up. For these unaccompanied minors seeking asylum, the only thing that could give them the security they lacked was a quick decision on their application. For the other children and young

people who took part in the consultation and focus groups, having a family and good friends was repeatedly cited as the main things for feeling secure.

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