The mediational role of schools in supporting psychosocial transitions among unaccompanied young refugees upon resettlement in Norway

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the role of schools in supporting unaccompanied young refugees in critical psychosocial transitions concerning processes of socialisation, integration and rehabilitation upon resettlement. Drawing from a qualitative research project based on interviews with students and staff conducted during fieldwork in five secondary schools in Norway, the findings suggest that the psychosocial support provided by schools is random and lacks a concerted effort among relevant professionals. Making schools refugee-competent calls for more comprehensive representations of refugee students and teachers, enhanced collaboration concerning psychosocial support as well as school-based interventions as an integral part of educational policy and practice.

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1. Introduction

If I should write a book about my life, it will have to be called ‘Sad’. It cannot be just one book; it may be ten, twenty, there is so much to tell (Faiz, unaccompanied young refugee).

The above was stated by Faiz, a young Afghan refugee, who came to Norway as an unaccompanied refugee minor. Only 16 years old, Faiz started his journey on a seven-month long journey from Afghanistan to Norway – a journey under extremely harsh conditions. Four years later, traumatic memories of what happened before and during his flight still haunt him and cause anxiety, sleeping difficulties as well as concentration problems in school.

The term ‘unaccompanied refugee minors’ refers to refugee children and young people under the age of 18 who arrive in Norway unaccompanied by parents or other persons with parental responsibility (UDI, 2012). In the past decade, approximately 9000 unaccompanied minors have arrived in Norway to seek asylum on their own (UDI, 2013). If the asylum application is approved, asylum seeking minors obtain refugee status, are granted residence and will be resettled in a Norwegian municipality.

Unaccompanied minors mostly left their home country due to serious threats to their own or their family’s life and security, generally as a result of armed conflict and/or political, ethnic or religious persecution. The majority has experienced life threatening events and physical abuse prior to and during their flight, and suffers from the loss of parents, family and friends (Jakobsen et al., 2014). Due to being minors, along with being separated from their parents in an often extremely demanding life situation, unaccompanied refugee minors are considered to be a particularly vulnerable group of refugees in need of special protection and support (Fazel et al., 2012; Halvorsen, 2002; Hodes et al., 2008; Huemer et al., 2009; UNHCR, 1994).

International studies of refugee children and young people in exile indicate a high number of emotional and behavioural difficulties, primarily related to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), sleeping problems, anxiety and depression (Fazel et al., 2012; Huemer et al., 2009; Lustig et al., 2004; Vervliet et al., 2013). Furthermore, the prevalence of mental health problems is much higher among unaccompanied refugee minors than among refugee children who arrive with their family (Bean et al., 2007; Derluyn et al., 2008; Hodes et al., 2008; Huemer et al., 2009).

Without parental support, unaccompanied young refugees have to meet a number of psychosocial challenges associated with separation and loss as well as requirements of relocation and integration into a new society. Moreover, the developmental challenges of adolescence become more complex due to the traumatic nature of the refugee experience and the exile-related stressors faced upon resettlement (Berman, 2001; Vervliet et al., 2013). The developmental and psychosocial transitions unaccompanied adolescents experience not only bring about mental growth

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1 Through the article, the terms ‘minors’, ‘children’ and ‘young people’ will be used interchangeably in relation to unaccompanied asylum seekers and refugees under 18 years of age on arrival in Norway.

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and psychosocial adjustment but also increased vulnerability and risk for maladjustment (Niesel and Griebel, 2005).

Although they may be vulnerable at times, young refugees who manage to come to a country of refuge on their own, despite adversity and harsh conditions during the flight, are resourceful young people exercising agency (Deveci, 2012; Eide and Hjern, 2013; Watters, 2008). Adequate education and care during the initial years of resettlement, along with their commitment to succeed, appear to be decisive factors in young refugees’ mental health and long-term adjustment (Eide and Hjern, 2013; Kohli and Matner, 2003; Mock-Muñoz de Luna, 2009; Montgomery, 2011). A subject of increasing interest is how host countries’ educational systems may support refugee children’s sociocultural adaptation as well as inclusion in their new school environment (Hamilton and Moore, 2004).

Despite the fact that several studies document mental health problems in refugee young people (Bean et al., 2007; Fazel et al., 2012; Hodes et al., 2008; Huemer et al., 2009; Lustig et al., 2004; Vervliet et al., 2013) little is known about the psychosocial issues encountered upon resettlement and what they mean with regard to young refugees’ functioning in everyday life in general and school in particular. Gaining a further contextual understanding of unaccompanied young refugees’ psychosocial challenges, school experiences and needs is of utmost importance for developing adequate support (Goark et al., 2011; Lustig et al., 2004; Ungar and Teram, 2005). However, there are only a limited number of international studies on this subject, and only few address refugee students’ psychological and social adjustment upon resettlement. Kja–Keating and Ellis (2007), examining the school experiences of Somali adolescents resettled in the United States, claim that psychosocial adjustment, belonging and connection to school has not been investigated before among resettled refugees. There is thus a great need for more comprehensive knowledge concerning young refugees’ school experiences as well as their psychosocial needs during resettlement.

The present study seeks to contribute to bridging the existing knowledge gap by interviewing educators as well as unaccompanied young refugees themselves regarding psychosocial issues impacting school functioning. The main objective of this article is to explore and call attention to the mediational role that schools may play in supporting the psychosocial challenges unaccompanied young refugees face upon resettlement. Based on sociocultural and ecological developmental approaches as well as on empirical data from a Norwegian research project, the article will discuss how schools may enhance psychosocial adaptation and well-being in resettled young refugees.

2. Unaccompanied refugee minors: from uprooting to resettlement

From the late nineties onwards, the number of unaccompanied minors seeking asylum in Norway has steadily increased. In 1996, less than 100 unaccompanied minors applied for asylum, whereas in 2013 1070 unaccompanied asylum seeking minors arrived (UDI, 2013).

The majority, about 80%, of the unaccompanied minors arriving in Norway are male. Most of them are between 15 and 17 years of age; only about 10% are under 15 years old on arrival. In 2012, the largest number came from Afghanistan, followed by Somalia and Eritrea; in 2013, Afghanistan and Somalia swapped places in the ranking (UDI, 2013). The unaccompanied refugee minors who have been granted residence in Norway often originate from countries where their schooling has either been disrupted or where access to formal schooling has been difficult. Most young refugees show high motivation to attend school as they consider education a decisive means to a better future. However, the unaccompanied young refugees not only have salient educational needs, they also require psychosocial support in connection with the various challenges faced upon resettlement.

2.1. The Norwegian school context for young refugees over 16 years old

The ten-year compulsory school in Norway comprises two main stages: primary school (grades 1–7) and lower secondary school (grades 8–10). General upper secondary education lasts three years, though vocational study programmes involving apprenticeship last four years.

While access to education for asylum seeking children of compulsory school age (6–16 years) is enshrined in the Education Act (1998), asylum-seekers aged 16–18 years do not have the same rights and access to education. Adequate schooling for this age group is often ignored during the asylum process (Mock-Muñoz de Luna, 2009).

As soon as refugee minors over 16 years old obtain a residence permit, they have a right to further education. However, students above compulsory school age who have not completed Norwegian compulsory schooling or its equivalent first need to follow a ‘condensed’ compulsory school programme, equivalent of lower secondary school (1–3 years), under the auspices of Adult Education.2 This educational provision was initially organised to offer adults who had dropped out of compulsory school a second chance to complete their schooling, but nowadays most students are minority young people (Deblen et al., 2013).

Minority students in general and male students from non-Western backgrounds in particular, have a high dropout rate, i.e. 60%, when they first enter Norwegian upper secondary education; especially in vocational training the dropout rate is very high (Pastoor, 2013; SSB, 2014). The causes of school dropout among language minority students may include educational, socio-economic and cultural factors. However, regarding young refugees, the challenges concerning mental health and well-being may also have an impact.

It may seem paradoxical that even though most refugee students show high motivation, the majority fails to complete upper secondary education. Consequently, it is crucial to gain a deeper understanding of why this happens and how young refugees can be supported to reach their full potential in school.

3. Psychosocial well-being and psychosocial transitions

During resettlement, unaccompanied young refugees’ psychosocial well-being is affected by the close interplay between the psychological aspects of past and present experiences as well as the relationship with their new social environment. It is important to recognise that resettlement implies more than a change of places, it also involves transitions. Changes are situational, for instance moving to a new country and may happen from one day to the next. Transitions, on the other hand, are characterised by psychological and developmental processes that take time:

A change occurs when something in the external environment is altered. These changes trigger an internal psychological reorientation process in those who are expected to carry out or respond to the change. Transition is this internal process that people must go through in order to come to terms with a new situation. Unless transition occurs, change will not work. (Bridges, 2009, p. 3)

2. Adult education, i.e., education and training organised especially for adults, is regulated by § 4A of the Education Act (1998).
The internal reorientation process Bridges refers to also applies to the transitions young refugees must go through in order to come to terms with themselves, their traumatic past and their new environment. By (re)constructing ‘a conceptual framework of meaning into which they can project their life’ (Hundeide, 2001), refugee young people may again make sense of their lives and their futures. The reconstructed framework leads to a sense of coherence that promotes psychosocial well-being (Antonovsky, 1987).

The initial phase of resettlement, a liminal period between states of separation and incorporation, entails a number of psychosocial transitions (cf. Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hamilton and Moore, 2004; Niesel and Griebel, 2005; Pastoor, 2013). Three transitional processes that are significant with regard to young refugees’ schooling are:

• A socialisation process: the development from childhood to adulthood, a process in which one appropriates the knowledge, skills and norms needed for participation and inclusion in society.

• An integration process: the sociocultural adaptation to life in a new society. Resettlement in an unfamiliar society with very different demands concerning social, cultural and linguistic skills involves many demanding challenges.

• A rehabilitation process: the process of mental recovery and restoration of meaning after traumatic pre-migration experiences, as well as dealing with exile-related stressors.

4. Theoretical framework

The sociocultural and ecologial approach employed in this article entails a holistic developmental perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hundeide, 2001; Säljö, 1998; Ungar, 2012; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch et al., 1995).

4.1. Mediation and mediational means

A major characteristic of sociocultural theory is the centrality of mediation, mediated action and mediational means in human learning and development (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch et al., 1995). People think and communicate with and through cultural tools (Säljö, 1998), which are representational and structuring resources for dealing with the physical and sociohistorical ‘realities’ of society. The relationship between human beings and the world is thus indirect, that is to say it is mediated by means of cultural tools, such as language, concepts and activities as well as artefacts like pens and computers. People not only draw on these mediational means to make meaning for themselves and to communicate with others, but also to act upon the world around them (Wertsch et al., 1995).

Schools are central and complex mediation systems. Institutional ways of organising schools, educational practices, and representations of teachers and students are some of the cultural tools used. This cultural ‘toolkit’, which is the premise for much of school practice is rarely made explicit (Pastoor, 2008). To be able to succeed in Norwegian school, young refugees need to appropriate a great number of new cultural tools.

4.2. The social ecology of child development and resilience

According to Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ‘ecological model’, child development occurs in a complex system of interactions and relationships across various settings that together constitute an ecological environment. The model explains how both people and systems affect and are affected by each other. Consequently, to study young refugees’ development and adjustment, we must not only look at their immediate environment, the microsystem, but also at the larger sociocultural environment, the macrosystem. The microsystem includes settings in which young people directly interact with others, such as caregivers, teachers and peers. The mesosystem involves the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings the young people participate in.

In The Social Ecology of Resilience, Ungar (2012) explains how interactions with school, family, and community can promote children’s development and resilience. Antonovsky’s (1987) salutogenic approach, emphasising factors that promote health and well-being, supports much of contemporary resilience research. To be able to succeed in life despite anxieties and uncertainties, it is essential to experience life as a coherent entity. People’s ‘sense of coherence’ consists of three components: comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness (Antonovsky, 1987). Schools may function as ‘salutogenic’ arenas by mediating a sense of coherence in the lives of young refugees through activities that contribute to restoring safety and predictability as well as promote meaning and understanding (Betancourt and Khan, 2008).

5. The study

The present study draws on the school dataset from the FUS project (2010–2015), a qualitative research project carried out by the Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies. The project’s objective was to study the resettlement experiences of unaccompanied refugee minors with a particular focus on their schooling. The study was approved by the Norwegian Data Inspectorate (NSD).

The FUS study adopted a qualitative, ethnographically oriented, case study design, based on interviews and participant observation in schools and group-homes for unaccompanied young refugees in three municipalities. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews (lasting from 45 min to two hours) were conducted with young refugees and the professionals involved in the educational provisions and residential care made available for the young refugees.

5.1. Method

The school study involved ethnographically oriented case studies in five schools. The present article particularly focuses on the psychosocial role of school, beyond its educational role. The school dataset consisted of audio recorded interviews with refugee students and school staff conducted during fieldwork in four ‘lower secondary schools’ (i.e. grades 8–10 of the compulsory school programme) and one ordinary upper secondary school, as well as field notes. The different kinds of data allow for triangulation between data sources, which facilitate a deeper and broader understanding of the topic under study and enhance the reliability and validity of the collected data and analysis (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000; Creswell, 2013).

Fieldwork involves collecting information in the setting where the people under study live or work, that is, interact over time. This approach presupposes sensitivity to various ethical issues, such as how to gain access to the field, for instance (Creswell, 2013).


4 In addition to the author who initiated the FUS project, three Master’s students participated in the school data collection. Each Master’s student conducted interviews during fieldwork at one of the participating schools; the Master’s theses were qualitative case studies of a particular school. Additionally, the author collected data at two schools. The author alone is responsible for the content and writing of the present article.
5.2. Recruitment

Based on the acquired consent from the Norwegian Data Inspectorate, the municipal education authorities were contacted if they would be interested in participating in the study, and which schools were relevant\textsuperscript{5} to approach. All the schools contacted agreed to participate and welcomed the researchers into the classrooms as well as facilitated the interviewing of staff and students.

Gaining access to children in vulnerable positions for research may be difficult (Huemer et al., 2009; Wernesjö, 2014). Gatekeepers, that is, social workers and teachers, for instance, may impede as well as facilitate access. The question of trust is central and one way to gain trust is to meet with the young people and their gatekeepers during a period of time in their everyday settings. Consequently, the researcher/interviewer did not approach the refugee students directly. First, the teachers introduced the researcher to the class, and then the researcher presented the study to the students. The researcher visited the school several times, so the teachers, the students and the researcher could become acquainted. Subsequent-

ly, the students who were identified\textsuperscript{6} as unaccompanied refugees were invited to take part in the study.

This procedural recruitment was chosen to develop reciprocal trust between researchers and participants, especially as the information shared during the interviews could be of a sensitive or personal nature. Moreover, being familiar with the school setting, allowed the interviewer to refer to specific classroom episodes or contextual issues related to the interview questions, which made the participants’ descriptions more ‘thick’ (Geertz, 1973) and meaningful.

5.3. Participants

The school study primarily drew on individual interviews with the young refugees themselves ($n = 40$), and the staff involved in their schooling ($n = 25$, i.e. 14 teachers, 8 school counsellors, and 3 heads of department).\textsuperscript{7} Two-thirds ($n = 26$) of the refugees attended the compulsory school programme available to newly resettled refugees, while the remaining 14 attended upper secondary school.

The refugees interviewed were between 16 and 23 years of age. However, all of them were under 18 years of age upon arrival. Of the 40 young refugees, 32 were male and 8 were female. These numbers corresponded to the gender distribution of arrivals in Norway, as about 80% of the unaccompanied refugee minors are male. Moreover, the ethnic background of the young refugees interviewed was consistent with arriving unaccompanied minors’ country of origin. The majority (60%) originated in Afghanistan (24), followed by Somalia (6), Eritrea (2), Ethiopia (2), Iraq (2), Iran (1), Chechnya (1), Nigeria (1) and Zimbabwe (1).

5.4. Data analysis

The present study drew chiefly on the transcribed interviews, the field notes made during school visits were used as supplementary information. The initial analysis of the transcribed interviews involved recurrent reading while making annotations of emerging topics. Each interview transcript was first coded ‘vertically’, focusing on one interview at a time, to identify tentative units of meaning. Then they were coded ‘horizontally’ (across interviews), which brought about broader analytical categories. Psychosocial categories identified as having an impact on school functioning were, for instance, ‘loss and separation’, ‘psychological and traumatic stress’, and ‘need for guidance and support’.

However, the themes or patterns discerned did not simply emerge; they were actively discovered: “Without assumptions, concepts and theory, nothing at all emerges as meaningful, as ‘data’” (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000, p. 47). Subsequently, the categories identified were related to the model of critical psychosocial transitions faced during resettlement, an analytical framework developed by the author during the research project. The ‘critical transitions model’, which resulted from a close hermeneutical interplay between the collected empirical data, research literature and theory (cf. Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hamilton and Moore, 2004; Niesel and Griebel, 2005; Pastoor, 2013), consists of the following theoretical constructs: socialisation, integration and rehabilitation. The use of an explicit interpretive framework in displaying the findings is a central analytical strategy in critical, theoretically oriented qualitative studies (Creswell, 2013).

The findings below are presented along the three dimensions of the transitions model. The interview excerpts selected and analysed were not intended to be comprehensive – neither alone nor collected. The intention was rather to demonstrate the various psychosocial challenges the unaccompanied young refugees face upon resettlement and how they are dealt with in school.

6. Findings: analysis and discussion

The present article aimed to explore whether school – an institution that educates young refugees on how to become competent participants in society – may have a role ‘beyond education’, that is to say, a mediational role in supporting the psychosocial transitions the refugees face upon resettlement.

The challenges that the interviewed refugee students and teachers indicated as having an impact on the students’ emotional well-being and psychosocial adjustment are presented in relation to the school as an arena for socialisation, an arena for integration and as an arena promoting rehabilitation, i.e. a salutogenic arena.

6.1. School as an arena for socialisation

During adolescence, young people have to make fundamental decisions about their future, such as further education or a career (Rutter, 2003). Many of the refugee adolescents interviewed emphasised the need for a ‘parent figure’, a person providing care and support as well as guiding them to make right decisions.

Several of the young refugees reported that they were suffering from nightmares and sleeping problems. Frequent sleep loss affected their ability to engage in daily activities, as illustrated by the story of Saeed,\textsuperscript{8} a 19 year old Hazara refugee from Afghanistan. Saeed was granted asylum when he was 17 years old. He was offered residence in one of Norway’s largest cities where local child welfare authorities placed him in lodging on his own. At present, Saeed is attending the final year of the compulsory school programme. Saeed stated during the interview that he often had problems getting up in the morning\textsuperscript{9}:

\textsuperscript{5} In the three municipalities involved, four schools offered the compulsory school programme the newly arrived language minority students attended. All four were part of the FUS study.

\textsuperscript{6} Schools neither registered whether students were refugees nor their status as unaccompanied. It was thus up to the individual teacher or researcher to find out who was an unaccompanied refugee.

\textsuperscript{7} In addition, a school psychologist from the municipal Educational-Psychological Services and a psychiatric nurse from the municipal Refugee Agency, who were affiliated with two of the participating schools, were interviewed.

\textsuperscript{8} To protect their anonymity, the teachers and the pupils have been assigned fictitious, yet ethnically distinctive, names.

\textsuperscript{9} The interview excerpts in this article are translated from Norwegian into English by the author. The interviews are transcribed verbatim. Transcription conventions: ‘’’ indicate short pauses; ‘( )’ indicates that some text has been left out from the excerpt; [text] indicates additional information.
Sometimes… many times there is a problem, a well-known problem too. When I go to bed at night I cannot sleep. When I lie down at eleven or half past eleven, my eyes are closed but I feel awake, wide awake. (...) When it is morning, my head really hurts, and I can hardly get up. (...) I don't want to go to school. I think if I go there, I will not understand anything, so it is better for me to be at home.

Furthermore, Saeed told that some time ago, he had been worrying greatly about some close relatives who were in trouble. He had felt sad for several months, which resulted in frequent school absences. Saeed had expected that his teachers might ask him what was going on, but no one had asked.

Interviewer: So you would have liked it if someone had asked how you were doing and had talked with you?

Saeed: Yes, to be able to know what is going on and maybe showing me the way. Because when you are sad or come here alone, you do not know what to do, do you? You need a person to show the way.

Interviewer: And do you think that might be a teacher?

Saeed: Yes, I might suddenly choose the wrong way, isn't that it? I need someone who can tell me what to do, as I have no parents. Someone who can say 'such and such'.

One of the teachers, Karin, teaching at the same school programme that Saeed attended, reported that several of her students had problems getting to school in the morning. Therefore, Karin and some of her pupils agreed on a coping strategy.

Karin: I definitely get involved in the private lives of my students, perhaps more than I would have done otherwise. So I asked him, 'What is it that makes you not go to school?', and he answered, 'Yes... no...'. I asked the same question to this girl who cannot sleep at night, is crying and terribly depressed. So we made a deal, a joint agreement that they should not decide that they were ill before they got up, had taken a shower and eaten breakfast, unless they actually had a fever.

Interviewer: Did it work?

Karin: Yes, he is at school much more [laughs], and the same applies to this girl. It was rather sweet, one of the first times she did not come to school I got a text message: 'I have done everything you said Karin but I am still not able to come to school.'

Like Karin, several other teachers interviewed found themselves in a role going beyond the narrow meaning of teaching as primarily transmitting school knowledge, since they also mentored students by means of:

(...) advice and authority, praise for achievement, understanding their experience before and after flight, help in conflict resolution, further education and career advice. (...) This will require time and patience and may require teachers to step outside their role. (Rutter, 2003, p. 167, emphasis added)

The question is, however, whether teachers have ‘to step outside their role’, or can being a teacher be defined to include being a counsellor and a guide; in other words, being a significant adult in their students’ lives?

Having difficulties coping adequately with the encountered transitions upon resettlement can result in internalised as well as externalised symptoms, such as depression and behaviour problems. The case of Jamal, a young refugee struggling to fit in at school, may illustrate some of the challenges both he and his educators are confronted with in attempting to bridge the socialisation ‘gap’ faced during resettlement.

Jamal is a 19 year old refugee from East Africa, where he lived together with his father. As a child, Jamal moved several times due to armed conflict in the area where they lived. At fifteen years of age, Jamal came to Norway as an unaccompanied minor. Earlier he lived in a group home, but now he lives on his own. Before arriving in Norway, Jamal had not received any formal schooling. At present, he attends a vocational upper secondary school. Due to considerable problem behaviour, Jamal had been excluded from teaching several times and is in danger of being expelled from school.

In the interview, Jamal criticised the sanctions his problem behaviour was met with. Jamal did not consider being excluded from teaching as a serious punishment, and referred to his upbringing – how different his father reacted when Jamal had done something wrong. He shared that he was disciplined by means of corporal punishment and that he respected his father because he feared him: ‘I’m always afraid my father, because we have respect in the family. When he says, do like this, that’s how it’s done, you should do it. If not, you get a beating’. Jamal was thus used to a father exerting physical punishment, i.e. external control, as well as expecting obedience, while socialisation in Norway is based on internal control, i.e. self-regulated compliance to parents or teachers.

Jamal’s school counsellor stated in the interview that Jamal had received a lot of help, both from school and other support systems. However, Jamal opposed most of the support offered. Nevertheless, Jamal comes to school every day, even though he rarely attends classes. It seems he desperately wants to achieve a sense of belonging in his life (Antonovsky, 1987; Kia-Keating and Ellis, 2007).

Apparently, Jamal needs help to redefine the ‘life script’ he appropriated in childhood to be able to create meaning in his current life situation. When asked what kind of help he needs, Jamal answered he needs somebody ‘To show the right way, not the crooked one. I want to become a good boy. Manage school and get the education I need, the job I want. When you cannot get that, how do you get by then?’

Many young refugees have missed several years of primary and/or secondary socialisation as a result of disruption and displacement. The mentoring of resettled young refugees should aim at enhanced comprehensibility of their new life conditions to increase the manageability of the transitions encountered (Antonovsky, 1987).

6.2. School as an arena for integration

In modern society, school has an important role in teaching young people about democratic processes. Accordingly, in Norwegian schools there is a learning culture that values students actively contributing with their own reflections, which is very different from what most refugees are used to from their home countries. Several teachers stated that their students often feel uncomfortable in expressing own opinions, but rather learn the curriculum by heart.

However, several of the young refugees expressed in the interviews how much they enjoyed the discussions at school. Muna, a 17 year old Somali refugee girl, attended school in Somalia as well as Kenya, before she came to Norway. During the interview, she recounted her school experiences then and now:

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In Kenya, all students are silent because they are afraid that the teacher will beat them. They use what you call it… a stick or cane to punish, so they keep quiet. (...) Nowadays, we have a substitute science teacher, she usually gives us a booklet and then we have to find out things, and say what our opinion is. We sit in a circle and express our meaning about different things.
Renewable energy, for instance, everyone has to give their views concerning energy and nature. It’s good; everyone has an opinion and justifies it. (…) We who do not agree, we have to respect it. It is really fun.

Getting an education thus not only implies acquiring formal knowledge, it is also includes the acquisition of ‘tacit knowledge’ such as Norwegian school culture, norms and values. As a Norwegian teacher at the compulsory school programme put it:

We are not just occupied with subject teaching, we teach them to be citizens. I talk about voting and paying taxes in the Norwegian lessons, for instance. (…) They should learn to think critically. What is democracy? And all these questions which are typical for Social Studies issues, actually.

Teachers and classmates may play a decisive role concerning refugee students’ integration into Norwegian society. When attending the adapted compulsory school programme, the refugees do not have Norwegian classmates yet. However, they may meet Norwegian peers through participation in sports and other activities organised by NGOs. The people the young refugees interact with in these settings may not only promote their integration but raise their future aspirations too.

Arman, a 19-year-old Pashto refugee from Afghanistan is attending the final year of the compulsory school programme. In the interview, he told that at first he was very scared to speak in front of people. Then he learned to make PowerPoint presentations, which enabled him to convey his ideas.

I was the first or second in my class who became very fond of giving a speech, talking about politics and telling others what is going on in the world. I tell my classmates what my solution is, that this problem can be solved by doing this or that, right? (…) Well, there is quite a difference between Norway and Afghanistan. The largest is, as I see it, that Norway is a democratic country. People are equal here and all young people are entitled to free schooling. While in Afghanistan, many young people have no chance to go to school which is a human right. There is much discrimination and people are not equal.

Moreover, Arman had joined an international human rights organisation and stated: ‘My goal is to pursue higher education so that I can work or help people who have it extremely difficult. . . . I want to go back to work for people in Afghanistan.’ To make sense of his life, Arman used his adverse experiences from the past to construct ‘a script to live by’, a conceptual framework of meaning (Hundeide, 2001), into which he could project his future. This leads to a sense of coherence in his life, which promotes his psychosocial development and well-being (Antonovsky, 1987).

As Arman’s story may illustrate, the linkages and interactions between two or more settings or microsystems (cf. mesosystem; Bronfenbrenner, 1979), such as participation in both school and NGO activities, may enhance young refugees’ development and resilience (Ungar, 2012) as well as their integration into Norwegian society.

Several of the young refugees interviewed reported that mental health problems affected their school functioning. Nevertheless, they expressed joy and gratitude about the opportunity to go to school. Moreover, the social aspect, being together with peers, was often emphasised. Some of the refugees reported that feelings of being lonely and upset were more prominent when they were at home. Daniel, Head of Department at one of the compulsory school programmes, emphasised the school’s vital role in the interview:

School, going to school, it’s in itself positive, as it is offering structure in everyday life. (…) And that will be beneficial for all students of course, but perhaps especially for those who carry a heavy mental load.

The story of Faiz, a 20-year-old refugee, provides some insight into how ‘a heavy mental load’ may impact school functioning. Faiz was born in Afghanistan, but during his childhood he moved back and forth between Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan. After he had lost both his parents, he lived with different relatives and never had a chance to attend school. When Faiz was 16 years old he embarked alone on his journey to Norway, which was fraught with many hardships. During the interview, Faiz stated that he often has problems concentrating at school due to intrusive thoughts:

These thoughts just come automatically, I cannot control them. They just come automatically, feeling sad. I cannot talk, I cannot write, I just sit there. I sit in the classroom or I draw when I feel sad, just draw on the table, on paper and suchlike.

When feeling restless, Faiz often left the classroom. He had told some of his teachers about his problems and while some showed understanding, not all seemed to understand. One of his teachers reminded him every day: ‘Come to school and study hard, your education is free in Norway. If you want to sleep and relax here, many others can take your place’.

It may be difficult for a teacher to detect a pupil who is distracted due to intrusive thoughts. When the student fails to complete his task, the teacher may attribute it to being deliberately inattentive. To be able to give adequate support, teachers need to have an understanding of the problems students struggle with. It seems that neither Faiz nor the teachers knew how to actively cope with the problems he experienced. This may bring about feelings of failure as well as not fitting into school. For refugees like Faiz, who have experienced recurrent uprooting, it is of vital importance that they are able to develop a sense of belonging (Kia-Keating and Ellis, 2007), which may be mediated through supportive interactions in school.

We learned earlier (6.1) how the teacher Karin supported her students by teaching them a coping strategy. Yet, Karin confessed during the interview that she did not know how to approach and support students suffering from traumatic experiences:

I do not ask them, because I am very much afraid of picking at traumas, I am not a psychologist or psychiatrist. I cannot. So I must admit that I ask very little, and especially I try to avoid asking those unaccompanied refugees.

Moreover, Karin told that concerning a refugee girl who frequently came to her distraught in tears, she eventually contacted the school psychologist. However, in an interview with the school psychologist, he admitted he knew very little about the problems refugee students struggle with as he primarily dealt with learning disabilities. Karin asserted that neither the school health services, the school psychologist nor the child and adolescent psychiatry outpatient clinic she had referred students to, reported back to her due to their duty of confidentiality. But sometimes she asked her students, ‘Are you still talking with him or her?’

6.3. School as a salutogenic arena

International research has drawn attention to school as a salutogenic arena – an arena that promotes refugee students’ mental health and well-being (Fazel et al., 2012; Kia-Keating and Ellis, 2007; Mock-Muñoz de Luna, 2009; Montgomery, 2011; Rutter, 2003). Being able to go to school like Norwegian children and young people means a great deal to young refugees during a period of their lives that is often characterised by coping with traumatic memories of the past as well as concerns about the future (Bean et al., 2007; Vervliet et al., 2013).
Furthermore, a school counsellor at one of the compulsory school programmes explained that the municipal Educational Psychological Services (PPT) may neither assess the students nor refer them to Special Education. According to the PPT, he claimed, the students were not entitled to special education as they were trained in accordance with § 4A in the Education Act (1998), i.e. Adult Education, which is regarded to be ‘adapted’ education. However, when refugees attend regular lower or upper secondary school, they are entitled to special education.

From an ecological perspective, enhanced collaboration between schools, educational psychologists and mental health services may enable young refugees to reach their full potential (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Ungar, 2012). Much primary prevention work concerning refugee children's mental health can be done in the school context (Fazel et al., 2009). In one of the schools participating in the study, the school had an effective ongoing collaboration with a psychiatric nurse from the municipal Refugee Agency's Mental Health Team. The nurse, Hanne, not only offered students low-threshold ‘psychoeducational’ talks, she also mentored teachers, which they appreciated. However, not all refugee students wanted to talk with Hanne.

Adar, an 18 year old Iraqi refugee student, stated during the interview that he suffers from mental and physical problems resulting in school absence. When the interviewer asked him whether he had talked with Hanne about this, Adar answered very determined that he does not want to talk with her:

I do not believe in psychologists. When you hear a psychologist say ‘What’s on your mind’. when you’re just a little sick and think much. (...) I do not need her, and I do not know her. I will for instance never tell her anything about my life, you understand, when I do not know her.

Talking with a therapist seems to be a cultural tool Adar feels uncomfortable with. Also several other young refugees expressed that they do not like to talk about their difficulties and rather keep their feelings to themselves. As Adar’s case shows, it is important that young refugees who need help have confidence in the person offering support as well as have faith in the intervention. School-based group interventions with a less ‘individual’ focus, such as a whole-class approach (cf. Rousseau et al., 2005), may be a preferable alternative.

The school’s potential regarding primary prevention of refugee students’ mental health problems are highlighted in several studies, as it hits a broad population (Farmer et al., 2003) and because school-based services are considered low-threshold measures (Fazel et al., 2009). Moreover, school-based interventions enhance young refugees’ sense of belonging and connection to school, which may result in lower depression and higher self-efficacy (Kia-Keat and Ellis, 2007).

7. General discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that unaccompanied young refugees are confronted with various challenges in relation to the psychosocial transitions faced upon resettlement, and that schools can play a fundamental role in supporting them to deal with the transitions encountered. However, the mediational role schools have may be empowered as well as constrained by the resources available in the school system, as mediation is woven into complex cultural and institutional practices and discourses (Wertsch et al., 1995). Below, some of the practices and discourses, including central representations and categorisations, appearing in the presented findings, will be discussed.

7.1. The mediational role of schools in supporting young refugees

By employing the appropriate mediational tools, schools can support refugee young people to deal successfully with the various transitions faced upon resettlement. However, inadequate mediational tools may impede transitions. Wertsch et al. (1995, pp. 24–25) emphasise that ‘We certainly can and must be willing to reflect on, criticise, and change the cultural tools we find to be inadequate for whatever reason’. Consequently, regarding the school’s mediational role we need to look into which cultural tools may support resilient transitions in young refugees as well as positive school outcomes, and which may impede them.

Even though unaccompanied young refugees are motivated to succeed in school, many experience difficulties and may even drop out of school. In order to better understand why this can happen, we not only need to look at how well refugee students adapt to Norwegian school, but also how well Norwegian school adapts to this new group of students.

The present study reveals that the refugee students do not seem to have particular problems in appropriating technical tools like computers and PowerPoints. However, it appears to be more difficult to appropriate mental tools such as the Norwegian language as well as the Norwegian school culture, including adopting new student–teacher roles and relationships.

Furthermore, the study shows that the teacher’s role is a challenging one, as the refugee students depend on both academic and psychosocial support in order to succeed in school. The comprehensive role that is required of the teacher may entail rethinking the representation of ‘the teacher’. Likewise, the representation of ‘the refugee student’ has to be reconsidered. New representations do not just imply new teacher and pupil images; they also bring about new roles, attitudes and actions. The need for reconsidering the representations of the refugee student as well as the teacher will be discussed below.

7.2. A multifaceted representation of the refugee student

The social constructions and discourses surrounding unaccompanied young refugees are characterised by ambivalence and dissonance; they may be represented as being vulnerable and/or resourceful, as being victims and/or strategic minors, which in turn brings about ambivalent representations and attitudes (Watters, 2008; Wernesjø, 2014). Such inconsistent representations may impede the mediation of adequate support to refugee students.

Resettling refugee students have different educational as well as psychosocial needs from language minority students who were born and grew up in Norway. However, in the school system, refugee students are often subsumed within the larger category of ‘language minority students’, which they in some sense belong to, yet, they are so much more. This calls for a more complex representation of ‘refugee students’. However, refugee students are a heterogeneous group who share certain experiences, but who are also different from each other regarding educational background, for instance.

A multifaceted representation of refugee students entails that they have additional needs to be addressed by the school. As the study demonstrated, during resettlement unaccompanied young refugees have to face a number of educational and psychosocial challenges due to the following risk factors:

- Short period of residency in Norway.
- Interrupted and incomplete education.
- Being alone in Norway without parents and established social networks.
- Traumatic pre-migration experiences as well as exile-related stress.
To be able to overcome the challenges encountered and to reach their fullest potential, refugee students need additional support. If they do not get adequate support, it may result in academic as well as socioemotional problems in school. International research indicates that access to adequate schooling is key to better physical, mental and emotional health and well-being of refugee children (Fazel et al., 2009; Mock-Muñoz de Luna, 2009; Montgomery, 2011; Rutter, 2003).

7.3. A comprehensive teacher representation

The findings display that teachers can play a decisive role in supporting young refugees upon resettlement. To adapt to refugee students’ needs, it is important to have teachers, who show an active interest in pupils’ academic development as well as their psychosocial well-being. Consequently, one may raise the question of whether the role of the teacher needs to be changed due to the increasing number of refugee students in Norwegian schools.

It should not be necessary to reconsider the academic dimension of the teacher role as the leading principle for Norwegian education is ‘A school for all’, which entails adapted education as a central prerequisite (Education Act, 1998). However, a large study conducted among Norwegian lower secondary school students showed ‘there is actually little differentiation in the adaptation of learning environments to all pupils and that most effort is concentrated towards students at average or middle achievement levels’ (Cosmovici et al., 2009, p. 379). Also, the classroom observations in the present study disclosed that the education of the young refugees was rarely adapted to the individual student. Individual accommodations might be hardly feasible in the rather large classes that refugee students with quite diverse competences and needs attend.

Most teachers interviewed expressed that they were unable to adapt their instruction as much as required and called for both greater teacher density and more adequate teaching resources. Several of the teachers created their own teaching materials as the available textbooks were not adapted to this particular group of students. Moreover, the teachers emphasised that a great deal of time was spent on issues other than the curriculum as the newly resettled refugees needed support in many other ways.

The findings of the study show that many unaccompanied young refugees experience psychosocial and mental health problems which need to be taken care of and followed up by teachers and/or other professionals. Unfortunately, it becomes apparent that most teachers neither have sufficient knowledge nor competence regarding the psychological problems their students struggle with. As a result, the teacher may not recognise the symptoms or may be insecure about how to deal with them. The role of the teacher should not entail being a therapist, but knowing when to refer young refugees for additional services. However, the study showed that there are no effective structures in the school system for facilitating identification, monitoring and referring students. It was mainly up to the individual teachers to take action – or not.

Possibly due to a lack of understanding of the specific needs of resettling young refugees, both local and national education authorities seem to be restrictive in providing additional resources for their schooling. One of the interviewed school counsellors stated the following concerning the resources available:

But I can just say that we do not get enough resources as the authorities do not acknowledge the substantial problems our students actually have, such as students with severe psychosocial and social problems. Many students need more specially adapted education, which they can be given if we have smaller groups. If we had more resources we could to a greater degree give the students what they need.

It is important that education authorities recognise the need for more active and systematic efforts to support unaccompanied young refugees upon resettlement. There is a lot to take in and catch up on after a childhood on hold.

8. Concluding remarks

In today’s global world, Norwegian schools may expect highly diverse groups of students and, among these, many from refugee backgrounds. As the present study shows, the refugee students are confronted with a number of psychosocial challenges, which their teachers do not always know how to relate to. The resettlement of unaccompanied young refugees requires a cohesive and well-coordinated approach aimed at enhancing refugees’ psychosocial well-being.

Moreover, it is important to underline that refugee adaptation is a mutual process (Hamilton and Moore, 2004). It is not only refugee students who have to adapt to the educational and sociocultural requirements of Norwegian schools. Likewise, Norwegian schools, including the broader ecology involving local and national education authorities, need to actively support resettling refugee students’ adaptation to life in a new society. A school system that positively adapts to a new situation and deals well with required transitions can be said to display resilience (Masten et al., 2008).

Young refugees’ school experiences cannot be understood by only focusing on student–teacher–school relationships; also the way in which larger social, cultural and political contexts (cf. macrosystem; Bronfenbrenner, 1979) act as mediators, need to be considered. Drawing on a larger national political and human rights context, Boyden (2008) argued that current British refugee and education regimes are reluctant to fulfil their responsibilities towards asylum seeking and refugee children. She pointed to a nationalist discourse excluding forced migrants, which makes it difficult for teachers to achieve a successful integration of refugee children in British schools.

Also the findings from this study disclose how current discourses in Norwegian legislation, immigration and education systems involve representations and categorisations of children, in relation to refugee status as well as age (e.g., asylum seeking or refugee children, unaccompanied or accompanied, under and over 16 years old) that mediate a range of exclusionary practices concerning their education, care and support. Adequate schooling for young people aged 16 years and older is often ignored during the asylum process (Mock-Muñoz de Luna, 2009). But even after having received asylum, young refugees’ needs are not always adequately dealt with in the school system. The compulsory school programme that most young refugees attend is regarded as ‘adult education’, which implies that refugee students’ rights are different from regular compulsory school students. The ambivalence in the school system makes it more difficult for teachers to provide adequate support to refugee students. A counsellor at one of the compulsory school programmes confirmed the liminal position refugee young people have in the Norwegian school system:

This is of course a student group that is not very large, numerically it is not. And therefore they often fall somehow outside the interest of those managing the school system. And the fact that we slightly are between three different school systems, i.e., adult education, upper secondary school and primary school, and to some extent belong a little to each of them and therefore not entirely belong to any of them, contributes to that we fall slightly outside routines and systems. So I wish that there was more awareness of what kind of student group this is.
New representations of refugee students as well as teachers are thus called for as mediational means that may act as supporting and structuring resources to deal with the new social reality in Norwegian schools. Moreover, in order to adopt a comprehensive approach to refugee schooling, schools need to be aware of the interdependence of the various systems that are part of young people's social ecology. The key to developing refugee-competent schools is to mediate supportive interactions between the parties involved, such as teachers, school psychologists and mental health professionals, for instance. Their collaboration should aim at supporting the ‘best interests’ that underpin the special rights awarded to refugee children as the guiding principle (UNCRC, 1989; UNHCR, 1994). According to Article 20 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (hereafter UNCRC), all children temporarily or definitively deprived of their family environment are entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the State.

Moreover, States Parties agree that education shall be directed to the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential (UNCRC Article 29.1.a, emphasis added). What does this mean for unaccompanied young refugees resettling in Norway, a country that in 2003 incorporated the UNCRC in Norwegian law? How may these statutory rights ratified on a macrolevel be implemented on a microlevel, i.e. in schools and classrooms, to help a highly vulnerable group of young refugees achieve their full potential?

8.1. Implications

The social, psychological and emotional challenges unaccompanied young refugees face upon resettlement need to be taken seriously and followed up by providing adequate support on site or outside school. However, this does not necessarily mean that the young refugees are in need of large-scale psychological or therapeutic interventions. Enhancing the supportive role of teachers as well as school-based interventions is therefore suggested. Consequently, it is vital to train educators on the psychosocial effects war has on young refugee’s well-being and development, in order to gain more competence concerning mental health and trauma symptoms.

8.2. Limitations and recommendations for further research

There are some limitations to this study that need to be acknowledged. First, the sample of the municipalities selected for the study was not randomly selected: the unaccompanied young refugees’ school experiences may thus not be representative of the overall unaccompanied refugee population in Norway. Second, the vast majority of the refugees interviewed were males and most of them came from Afghanistan. However, the sample is consistent with the population of unaccompanied young refugees arriving in Norway, i.e. in terms of gender and country of origin, at the time of the data collection. Third, the unaccompanied young refugees in the sample were all attending school as the study aimed to study young refugees’ school experiences. Young refugees who have dropped out of school may have experienced particularly demanding challenges. It is therefore recommended that further research involves longitudinal studies examining the school experiences of young refugees over time, following up students who succeed as well as students who drop out of school.

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