



## A study on Children perceptions of social exclusion and the structural drivers of discrimination in Norwegian elementary schools

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores children's understanding of social exclusion within their school contexts through a critical race theoretical lens and how social exclusion and repression occur in a country whose policy is typically linked with equality and diversity. Our research was conducted in two primary schools in a big city in middle Norway, where urban segregation creates significant differences in school composition. This qualitative study research was made up of fifteen focus group interviews with 46 children from the age of 9 to 12 in two cases of two public schools, one urban and one suburban school. In terms of school demography, the Urban school was in the central part of the city, where local Norwegian origin families have been part of the same neighbourhood for years. The suburban school is located in a high-poverty area and highly segregated along racial, ethnic, and cultural aspects. As previous studies stated, there are structural inequalities in Norwegian schools, still there is a gap on the description of its consequences. This study pay attention to the voice of children and describe school discrimination, isolation, and unsupported processes in both schools. This innovative study shows that children in both school contexts need additional recognition. In addition, we add that educational policies need to be revised by including aims for collaboration, coordination and capacitation of children and families in their school communities and outside the structural limits. Further, we add that local schools should be part of global communities.

### 1. Introduction to the structural drivers of discrimination in Norwegian schools

This article explores children's perception of the school culture, rules, and interaction, to understand how exclusion related to discrimination can be constructed, even in schools working towards overall goals of inclusion (Ainscow, 2020; Razer et al., 2013). Social exclusion and discrimination are social constructs developed within the community around children (Killen et al., 2016) and amongst children (Cooley et al., 2016; Plenty & Jonsson, 2017) and they could result in repression (Deetz, 2005). Social exclusion can occur for diverse reasons, such as personal characteristics or due factors such as being part of a minority group, when exclusion challenges people's fundamental need to belong to a social unit (Hutchison et al., 2007). Group discrimination in schools could be directed towards a minoritised group of people that seem different (Modood, 2004). This article explores children's understanding

of social exclusion within their school contexts through a critical race theoretical lens and how social exclusion and repression occur in a country whose policy is typically linked with equality and diversity (Imsen et al., 2017). The epistemology of this theory seeks to search for the emancipation of the students and promote their freedom from restrictive structures. The goal of assess critically and changing the society (Fui et al., 2011).

All Norwegian municipalities ("school owners") the local municipal education authorities, are the bodies that have the responsibility to maintain the right of a quality education in Norwegian schools (Norwegian Government, 2014). In this research we are trying to investigate how different structural factors in Norway can contribute to a variety of exclusion processes, other scholars have highlighted causes pointing out the school urban segregation, school organisation, and the culture, families, and schools.

Urban segregation is an issue in big Nordic cities (Aranya et al., 2017;

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Tunström & Wang, 2019). Therefore, we expected to see significant differences in the children's school culture between schools located in different geographical areas (Cavicchia & Cucca, 2020; Wessel et al., 2017). The result and consequences of segregation are however part of a broader structural issue. Mainly, this has to do with the settlement distribution of the population with an immigrant background versus the rest of the population over different local residential areas in big cities, resulting in stigmatised neighbourhoods (Andersen, 2019; Reisel et al., 2019).

As a second aspect, concerning the school organisation, Norwegian schools show tensions between policy and practice when applying assumptions about universal learning opportunities and pedagogies and how to perform the individualisation of practices (Arnesen et al., 2007; Lindner & Schwab, 2020). Furthermore, Wallenius et al. (2018) and Osler and Lybaek (2014) pointed out how the schools aim to compete through standardised student tests and online rankings, and normative curriculum, putting a new emphasis on school demands affecting the school organisation. For example, researchers highlight how at Norwegian schools, minoritized communities are distributed in integration classes which are initially segregated to learn the Norwegian language when the native speakers participate in the ordinary classes (Finnvold, 2018; Hilt, 2015; Nes et al., 2018; Thomas, 2020;). Research has confirmed that children with immigrant backgrounds born in Norway tend to perform lower in school evaluations and the international test such as PISA tests (Frønes, et al., 2020). Although, those with good performance have higher ambitions than native Norwegian classmates (Reisel et al., 2019) and expectations and school effort (Friberg, 2019). Regarding the children support from school staff, specifically, the national policy advocates that teachers should have multicultural competences in a simple terms. The lack of explicit knowledge on such issues in teacher education entails an educational setting unable to address racial or ethnic segregation of offering information to the students about cultures without offering critical strategies to change the system regarding power social justice or discrimination (Benediktsson, 2022). Thomassen and Munthe (2020) indicate that still many teacher students are not offered the experience of being in multicultural settings during their training with valuable interpretations of identity, languages, and cultures. Following Elkorghli (2021), Fylkesnes (2018), Fylkesnes et al. (2018), Lindquist and Osler, 2016 and Thomassen and Munthe, 2020 state that Norwegian teacher education does not deal with diversity because it lacks both the tools and language to address diversity and challenge racism and other forms of inequality from their complex contemporary structures. They advocate for obtaining more knowledge on second language learners in Norwegian schools (Thomassen & Munthe, 2020) and teach teachers critical tools to deconstruct and analyse their own assumptions and pedagogical practices (Fylkesnes et al., 2018).

Concerning the school and the school communities, on one side, parental socioeconomic resources become an indicator of education competition and on the other side, discrimination is documented (Dankertsen & Kristiansen, 2021). Researchers highlight that children's social capital and school attainment are reproducing social inequalities at Norwegian schools (Fekjær, 2007; Huang et al., 2015). Previous research highlights how privilege is acquired and understood in Norwegian elite high schools (Halvorsen, 2020), and how the family school culture can harm children's cultural participation such as the desire to participate in sports (Strandbu et al., 2020). Several scholars have pointed out how the white Norwegian upper middle class represents a dominant white privilege (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Danielsen & Bendixsen, 2019; Wiborg, 2017). In that sense, the exclusion could appear because individuals are not aware of the mechanisms of racialization (Ballinas, 2017), and they could follow and construct norms and rules of power that are color-blind (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020; Pak, 2021) The mechanisms of color blindness and sameness (Ringrose et al., 2023) work without any notice or reflection upon them (LeChasseur et al., 2020). Regarding culture and values, other scholars state that

educational segregation is a societal issue linked to culture (Hervik, 2019). Kyllingstad (2017) highlights that Norwegians perform a colour-blind ideology. A major issue is how the Norwegian culture is not dealing with differences when minoritised students experience marginalisation (Midtbøen et al., 2014a, 2014b; Rysst, 2017). As a response, critical race scholars in the Nordic context have responded to egalitarian principles with a contribution of students' participation in the research (Chinga-Ramirez, 2017; Pihl et al., 2018).

Following the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have the right to be heard in matters concerning them (United Nations, 1989). Students' perspectives on their lives are often overlooked (Fylkesnes et al., 2018). There is a contingency among the relational processes of children's socio-cultural environment and the different powers involved around children. Therefore, there is a great need to contextualise their voices within their social, economic, and cultural context (Horgan, 2017). Therefore, this article focuses on identifying the structural drivers of discrimination in two contexts that differ significantly along different dimensions. The main goal is listening to the children voices by examining their own experiences (Aldgate, 2010).

In a nation like Norway where inclusive education is an important aspect of ensuring children's welfare and future possibilities, it is an educational problem when there is not enough knowledge of how exclusion can be generated in an everyday school context. We employ a research design that includes schools from contrasting areas, to make visible hidden factors that help create new inequalities for children. Based on prior research and the lack of awareness of how exclusion can generate unequal childhoods in Norwegian society, we ask: *How do children perceive discrimination within their school culture, and which structural drivers for discrimination can be identified in two Norwegian schools?*

## 2. Critical race theory in the Norwegian context

Our study is grounded in critical race theory and intersectionality, which provide a conceptual basis for understanding the experiences of children from different racial and ethnic backgrounds in educational settings. Critical race theory emphasizes that racism is not only a matter of individual prejudice or discriminatory actions but also embedded in institutional and cultural practices, which is particularly relevant to our study that examines how schools reproduce segregation and inequality. To provide a qualitative account of how children perceive discrimination within the school culture, our analysis is informed by intersectionality as an aspect of critical race theories (Gillborn, 2015). Critical race theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework and organizing tool for social justice that base its premises on a notion of white supremacy as the white-ness considered the norm, while all others are anchored in stereotyped racially stigmatised communities (Dixon & Rousseau Anderson, 2018; Yosso, 2005). The aim of this approach is to highlight intersections between race and ability, in order to discuss equity and analyse the context in which social systems reproduce inequality through structural drivers such as policies, culturally sustained pedagogy, organisational culture, and structured oppression (Alim & Paris, 2017; Cabrera, 2019). Critical race theory contributes to the visibility of racism and white dominance, which is evident in several educational systems (Bonilla-Silva, 1997, 2015; Christian, 2019; Öhrn & Weiner, 2017). An issue in the Norwegian context is also how strong normative cohesion can lead to new forms of exclusion even though the ideal is to create universal learning opportunities by ignoring cultural differences (Viruru, 2001). Critical race scholars in the Nordic context have responded to egalitarian principles with a contribution of students' participation in the research (Chinga-Ramirez, 2017; Pihl et al., 2018). This research is scarce and only a few scholars have focused on children's perceptions and experiences of social exclusion or discrimination in primary schools in Norway. Current research mainly focuses on immigrant's (Chinga-Ramirez, 2017) and indigenous (Stenseth, 2023) self-identity power relations embedded across students' ethnic, gender, and

class identities (Thorjussen & Sisjord, 2018) and racial discrimination (Hagatun, 2020; Hansen et al., 2016). This article investigates the children’s perception of diversity and multiculturalism (Leonardo & Grubb, 2018) and Whiteness (Sleeter, 2001, 2016).

### 3. Methods

This research is an exploratory qualitative case study design in which we aim to explain what students living in two different neighbourhood in a city located in the middle of Norway said about what is like experiencing inequality (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The overall study is a collaborative effort where three Nordic municipalities participate in researching social inequality through looking at contrasting schools and school areas (Corral-Granados et al., 2022). In the project researchers have chosen the schools in close collaboration with municipal workers, to ensure relevance of the analysis with a multitude of data gathering methods, such as individual interviews and questionnaires with children and teachers. In this specific article we will only focus on the children’s interviews in light information acquired in the project and utilized in other publications. Both group of children interviewees participate in schools that are representative of two contrasting typical cases, one in a school from a privilege socio-economic status (SES) area and other from a school in a lower status socioeconomic neighbourhood (Matthews & Ross, 2010).

The different school contexts are the main contextual factor in the comparative data analysis.

The focus group interviews with children in two different schools were the sole research tool implemented (Given, 2008) as recommended for exploratory studies (Matthews & Ross, 2010). An interview guide included in Appendix 1 was used to trigger discussion (Lewis, 1992). No questions were directly addressing ethnic, ability, or cultural discrimination, with the goal of participants, not othering perceptions (Moffitt et al., 2019).

This study is a part of the larger research project “Nordic Unequal Childhood” from The Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). The larger project was designed to describe the challenges experienced by the communities of learning and the school administration related to inequality and discrimination at the Nordic schools. The project leaders were in touch with the school leaders, who contacted the children’s families, and researchers submitted a summary of the project together with a parent’s ethics authorisation in line with national research ethics. The children from the families who decided to participate were divided into groups by their class teacher. Their class teachers subsequently selected children after parents signed the collaboration agreement, and the ethical consent forms were given to the parents of those children who wanted to participate (Mills & Gale, 2004). These children were distributed in focus groups for interviews from two to four children together and interviewed together with their age groups ranging from 9–10 to 12–13 years and were given the opportunity to end the interview at any point (Lewis, 1992). Children were allowed to leave at any moment during the interview or withdraw from the research afterward (Halpenny, 2020; Hurley & Underwood, 2002). Two researchers documented each of the group discussions through recorded interviews (Schwartz & Durkin, 2020). We have focused on using the children’s statements and experiences respectfully, as well as anonymized the areas of the city and schools.

### 4. Research sample

The data collection took place in two schools, one located in a suburban area and other one in an urban area of a central city in Norway. We selected a strategic sample (Robinson, 2014) of children from the suburban school in terms of resources in the suburban area and children from the upper-status school located in the city centre. Regarding the first school, located in the urban area of the city, the “high performing urban school” characterised by a population born in Norway with low

unemployment rates among the adults. The school has been purposefully selected and named “high status” due to results on national statistics on school performance. The regional reports pointed out that the school is characterized by a strong learning culture, high student well-being, support from teachers, and academic support from home. The students from this school show high competencies in English, maths, and reading, in comparison to the regional and national test results (Skoleporten, 2021).

In regard to the second school, the district scores from the area where the suburban school is located are one of the lowest in the municipality survey, measuring several key living condition indicators. In the academic year 2020/21, >30% of students located in this suburban district have an immigrant background of non-western origin, compared to 6% in the municipality. > 30 % of students receive special Norwegian language training compared to only 5.6% of the school children population in this middle-size Norwegian city. This district also has a higher percentage of people with a non-European background: > 30 % compared to 11% in the rest of the municipality. This district has one of the lowest scores in the city when it comes to crucial living condition variables, such as income level, educational level, and disability benefits among the residents (Vrålstad et al., 2012). Furthermore, the school district also has a higher level of unemployment compared with the municipality in general. > 15% of households are included below the poverty line compared to 8.1% in the region (Kommune, 2015; Vrålstad et al., 2012; Kommune, 2021). The school shows very low results in national tests in both maths and English in comparison with the other schools around the city Reading measures have decreased from 2018 until now. The school shows low results on a national-scale pupil survey of learning culture, student democracy and participation, personal challenges, and learning assessment (Skoleporten, 2021).

### 5. Research Participants

This interview study included students (n = 46) (50% girls and 50% boys), 28 students participating in 9 focus groups in a suburban school and 18 students participating in 6 focus groups in the urban school, with a mean age of 11.2 years (Please see Table 1).

The unit of the data analysis were the children in grades 4 and 7 (within the age cohort from 9 until 12 years of age) and it was the parents who decided to accept the invitation of taking part in the

**Table 1**  
Data Overview. School Information and Focus Group Composition.

Suburban school		Urban school	
500 students and 123 qualified teachers	Ratio 8/1 adult	300 students and 41 qualified teachers.	Ratio 15.2/1adult
Interviews in two school years		Interviews in two school years	
Year4 (children 9–10 years old of age)	Year 7 (children 12–13 years old of age)	Year 4	Year 7
1st focus group 4 boys	7th focus group 3 boys 11 girl	1 0th focus group 1 boy/2 girls	13th focus group 1 boy 12 girls
2nd focus group 4 girls	8th focus group 2 boys/ 2 girls	11th focus group 1 bov/2 girls	14th focus group 1bov/2.girls
3rd focus group 4 girls	9th focus group 2 boys /2 girls	12th focus group 3 boys	15th focus group 2 boys 11 girl
5th focus group 1 boy/ 1 girl			
6th focus group 2 boys			
16children	12 children	9 children	9 children
28 children participants in the suburban school interviews		18 children participant in the upper status school interviews	
46 participants total in both schools			

research. The specific academic years correspond being the previous to the national tests, as students in Norway have regularly taken national tests in the fall of 5th and 8th grade in reading, numeracy, and English (Statistics Norway, 2023).

The focus group interviews were conducted with the aim to elicit the children’s experiences, beliefs and opinions, and the two interviewers tried to stimulate discussion among the participants (Gibson, 2012; Guest et al., 2017; Lewis, 1992). The children knew each other and created meaningful social interactions during the sessions (Bagnoli & Clark, 2010). Interviews took place at school during children’s break time. There was always a familiar adult in the room during the year 4 interviews, while in the year 7 interviews, children were alone with the interviewers.

The interviews were conducted by native Norwegian speakers and transcribed verbatim in Norwegian by the same researchers. One of them is a co-author of this article, while the main author acts as an external auditor of the peer debriefing techniques (Brantlinger et al., 2005). The main author has a background as a European immigrant, who came to the country as many to live together with her Norwegian partner. She has experienced, like many people with immigrant and refugee status, going through the family reunification process in Norway, as well as having participated in the obligatory Norwegian language and culture courses organised by the state. She translated the interviews from Norwegian to English and analysed the interviews together with two other bilingual interviewers. Due to the corona crisis, she joined the project when the data was already collected.

6. Data analysis

It can be acknowledged that the data analysis starts when the researchers arrive at a location and started the data collection (Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Morrison, 2017). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim (Greenwood et al., 2017) and analysed with heading thematic analysis (Cohen et al., 2017) appropriate analytic method for addressing the main aims of the study, exploration of the barriers or inequality experienced by the group of children from the low and high SES schools areas. In total, there were six different researchers, who transcribed the interviews in pairs. The structural level of the data analysis is based on the conceptual approach of inequality as a multi-faceted and complex entity that influence the children experiences from their own connections with different levels (Codioli McMaster & Cook, 2019) and becoming co-constructors of the social structures (Moses & Knutsen, 2019). The connections are analysed based on the children’s perceptions with their surroundings such as the school neighbourhood, family culture, school culture and rules, classroom culture and their own identity.

Using thematic analysis, we commenced making summaries of the interview transcripts, a set of initial codes was identified through open coding, we read each interview transcript and used the initial codes to compare experiences across participants. Finally, we selected distinct codes that were salient across multiple participants and organised them in themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1997), in which the data was categorised using the NVIVO12 and the use of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) (Bringer, Johnston, & Brackenridge, 2004). During the coding process and axial coding, we wrote each section of the discussion about the category titles and the analytical development of categories. Data reduction techniques were then employed to further refine these codes within each case (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The data is presented by the five structural levels of interaction that children experience (Please see Table 2).

The interview guide was followed, and respondents were asked about the structural levels starting from the macro level in which children are situated to the organisational, to the relationships with family, school staff and peers in which children have identified the examples of as sources of distress, adding the strategies that they have described as codes and subcodes. The categories were developed and related to the

Table 2  
Codebook and Themes.

Main Theme	Subtheme
Urban school and reproduction of racial inequality	Segregation of Whiteness through Housing and school elitist activities. Families promote a competitive childhood. School offers opportunities of outside cultural activities and Lack of school policies on play. From an in-class-learning-centred approach to goal-Oriented Pedagogy and lack of culturally relevant pedagogy Children’s Invisible Identity
A suburban school affected by racial segregation	Lack of expenses and opportunities to meet Shortage on family time and facilitation strategies at home School rules, discrimination and belonging through peer relationships Pedagogy result on the lack of engagement in academic content Imbalance between their freedom and the opportunities for social recognition

children’s recognition of challenges. In the final stage, examples of transcript were chosen to illustrate elements of the themes. As we have specified, the interviews were done by three couples and six researchers. After each interview, they met after each day of interviews, discussed the data, and elaborated on an initial coding scheme and memos. The leader of this article met all the researchers and did an independent analysis together with the three authors looking for the reliability of the data (Breen, 2006). The four of us did a cross-check of codes agreed upon in the final coding scheme looking at the level of agreement between participants and the frequency of opinion change among respondents.

7. Urban school and reproduction of racial inequality

In the following sections, we examine the children’s perceptions of exclusion within the urban school context (Please see Table 3).

We will present five themes explaining our main findings from the urban school, we find that the school rules are quite rigid and goal-oriented – while descriptions of a strongly integrated community illustrate how segregation occurs. The last theme shows that a competitive

Table 3  
Structural Levels as they Appear in the Analysis – Urban School.

Structural levels	Code	Subcode
1.Source of distress Children perception School environment	– Segregation of Whiteness through housing	Isolation, selection, common aims, sameness, segregation
2.Source of distress Children perception Family’s culture and outside school activities	– Families promote a competitive childhood	Pressure for coping. Pressure for achieving goals using goal oriented daily plans. Demanding extra-school activities older ages.Stress and lack of enjoyment
3.Source of distress Children perception school culture and rules	– School offers Outside Cultural activities – Lack of policies for play at school	Cultural visits Lack of playground area Rigid and goal-oriented school rules Overcontrol of their free time.
4.Source of distress Children perception of classroom culture	– Variation on pedagogy in subjects or staff-High demand and pressure – Lack of culturally relevant sustaining pedagogies	Distress Fear of making mistakes Lack values to recognise other cultures.
5. Source of distress Children perception of their own identity	– Cultural homogeneity – Invisibility of children’s identity	Social Status and cache of expensive brands Assimilation Discrimination and intolerance.

environment between children promoted by families to a large extent influences the childhood of our respondents at this school. Further, including how children are assimilated in a homogenous school culture, making the individual child's identity undistinguishable.

Segregation of whiteness through housing and school elitist activities.

In this school, families participate in celebrations with the school community outside school hours, being selective in their networking. As a child explains:

"We have had the same friends since kindergarten." "Our parents join in activities together after school." "Friends who live near [each other...], participate in the same activities".

The children focus on how to make friends with others resembling themselves:

"Be brave enough to speak out and ask to join" or "if you have something in common"; "Or if you walk the same way to school and live close to each other, in the same street".

Children narrated how families are closely integrated into this segregated community.

They are proud of their school community traditions together with families that they follow during the year, such as:

"'tourism fair' and the 'run for money day' (Nor."Operasjon Dag-sverk") and the day the whole school goes to an island."

### 7.1. Families promote a competitive childhood

Children felt their well-being came from being at home with their parents and watching television. Some of the children also expressed a lack of time together to communicate with the family. The children have routine-oriented tasks at home, and they claim to be responsible for following a daily plan. The plan regulated their use of technology and free time. Pressure for achieving, as the children also express great expectations from their parents and siblings to get good school results.

Children go to extra school activities that are paid by their families. On some occasions, the children identify that their extra school activities are the same as what a family member attended before. The children also explain how their extra school activities are goal-oriented and competitive, such as gymnastics and football. In these activities, they also have extra lessons complemented by strength training and weekend competitions.

Football, hockey, and handball went from being a mixed gender team, to become more competitive. So, "it feels less like a game"; "We go with the same people from school. We need the training to become professional".

They explain how this has changed over time: "*There was a lot less pressure on the activity, you didn't have to develop your strength every day. You could go to football training just to have fun. You played around more*".

The children remark that now, when they are in Year 7, these activities are competitive and a way of generating exclusion:

"Someone has to win in everything, and if there is someone on the team who fools around, they get furious"; "Some children are not very athletic. Those who are not sports enthusiasts play just for fun, sort of. They do not even have proper gym clothes; they just sit on the bench". "Now we go to training [instead of playing]". "Now we have grown from playing at school, that is not what we are doing anymore". "In the gym class, there was more play, but now we have to win. Now it is more aggressive".

The children seem to suffer from a certain amount of stress and in some cases when activities were very demanding, they stopped joining in.

School offers opportunities of outside cultural activities and lack of

school policies on play.

Concerning their daily activities at school, the children explain that they are often outside, and they enjoy visiting museums and other places, and going hiking together. Children also describe that their school premises limits their play stating that they must have the smallest playground in the whole city, with only a football field and a sitting area. It is generally accepted that:

"[During] break time we have a giant football field, and they have rules about how to use it as most people play football". "We don't have diverse opportunities to play in the outdoor area, only football and using the climbing frame".

Children identify several limitations, expressing anger towards some of the school's latest changes to some structural factors. In this interview paragraph, the interviewer asks the children about the specific rules:

"What are we going to do in the winter ... We are not allowed to do anything; we just have to stand around talking, sort of... We can't even climb trees," "Before, we were allowed to throw snowballs, climb trees and chew gum. All of that is forbidden now".

Child: "We had some trees before that everyone enjoyed climbing. Now they are all cut down."

Interviewer: "Why is it not allowed?"

Child: "Because we have a stricter principal now than before".

Several children feel that the school has too strict rules for their break time:

"There should not be such strict rules about, for example, throwing snowballs!"

The school is also part of another national program, "Guardian" (Nor. "Fadder"), where children are expected to act as role models to the youngest, still they feel that as overcontrol of their free time. The children in Year 5 are guardians for the first years and so on, with a responsibility of ensuring their well-being. However, there seems to be a lack of adult monitoring and mentoring to teach them this specific program's value. We found that Year 7 children were not happy to follow in the youngest children's play needs. Students can experience that they are not heard, and children can avoid participation. Some of the informants explain:

"Our teachers just push us to do it".

"We are not allowed to do anything in our free time".

The children express how adults do not ask them about their interests or need neither in completing academic tasks or in enjoying their free time.

From an In-class-learning-centred approach to Goal-oriented pedagogy and lack of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Most children agree that there is a variation in the pedagogy from subject to subject and how the teacher teaches daily life competencies. One year 7 student explains:

"We need maths in life. If you are going to buy a ticket or several tickets, you need to calculate how much it will cost."

Many explain that there are high demands and pressure at school. The children agree that in year 7, there is a focus on subjects, goals, and test achievements, and a lack of individual curriculum adaptations, producing stress and fear of making mistakes.

Children at this school express a lack of culturally relevant sustaining pedagogies and lack of values to recognise other cultures.

"Yes, I feel that I don't understand why I should learn about religions. Why do I need it? I understand that it is nice to know when you meet a Hindu on the street that you know what to say and do and stuff."

7.2. Children’s invisible identity

The interviews only exposed quite specific play interests for the entire school, there is a cultural homogeneity and lack of individualization of their interests.

Children are coping the outside culture from the tv shows. The children from Year 4 seem to be significantly influenced by a children’s program called Labyrinth, which is broadcasted on the main national TV channel, NRK. The program invites children to participate by building their own teams. The children explain how they locally engage in and create team-building activities. There is massive participation among the children in Norway “There were over 4500 registrations in 2019/20” in some regions.

The Year 7 children have developed subgroups to talk about the influential culture from outside.

“[we have specific] groups to talk about our interests. These can be Pokemon, football, videogames”. One of the children highlights, “[We] get friends from how we look [...] he got friends here because he was wearing a Liverpool football t-shirt.”

Material things such as fashion, specific brands as well as football t-shirts are important for being included in the popular groups at the school. We base these assumptions on the following accounts:

“Polo hats. If you walk over the old city bridge now, you are guaranteed to see nine Polo hats. They’re popular now. I’m never going to buy anything like that – it looks stupid. I bought my Polo caps, instead.”

They also say they will not wear clothes known for being specifically made for children or cheap brands:

“If you walk around with a woolly sweater from mum or Polarn o Pyret all the time, then it’s kind of like ‘what are you doing???’”  
 “There is a difference between buying something from Fretex (The Salvation Army shop) or Peak Performance!”  
 “There is a pressure on brands to fit in! [...] expensive brands, sort of. Not like Gucci and stuff, that’s too much”.  
 “So that’s why you shouldn’t wear too expensive brands just like the others”.

Our data show that the children were very much open about their opinions which can lead to exclusion from a research perspective. It is generally accepted that ‘some children do not fit in, and they actually blame the children that are excluded:

“Most of us are included. But some exclude themselves, in a way. Some don’t do what is right.... Pick their noses, [they] don’t shower, eat snow, and smell.”  
 “Those who do not fit in are not good at school, not good at sports”.

When these children were asked about what makes other kids different in this context, some explain using prejudices and stereotypical description describing children that smell, pick their noses, and are perceived as dirty, as well as not wearing certain clothes. Many children highlight that they were not willing to understand diversity and differences between themselves and others, blaming those who do not fit into the majority’s standards.

This theme illustrates how the children in the study express their perceptions of a world where inclusion is something you only deserve when you are assimilated into the majority, somewhat elitist culture that is dominating at the school.

8. A suburban school affected by racial segregation.

In the following section, we will present four separate identified themes from the suburban school (Please see Table 4).

In their narratives, the children disclose challenges experienced at different organisational levels. The home culture and values, the

Table 4  
Structural Levels as they Appear in the Analysis – Suburban school.

Structural levels	Code	Subcode
Sources of distress Children perception School environment	Lack of expenses and opportunities to meet	No choice of extra-school activities Friends from same cultural background meet Friendship with inclusive goals
Source of distress Children perception Family’s culture and outside school activities	Shortage of family time due to socio-economic challenges Facilitators strategies at home	Missing communication Materials thing compensation Play and being together Communication about respect and non-discriminatory values
Source of distress Children perception school culture and rules	School rules and discrimination	Sameness and lack of participation Lack of freedom to communicate in their mother tongue
Source of distress Children perception of classroom culture	Pedagogy result on the lack of engagement in academic content	Disengagement Boredom Non-participation
Source of distress Children perception of their own identity	Imbalance between their freedom and the opportunities for social recognition	Belonging through peer relationships Practice of culture

school’s formal and informal rules, the teacher’s pedagogy and peer-to-peer relationships were viewed by the children as essential in influencing their social recognition, creating barriers and preventing equality at school.

8.1. Lack of expenses and opportunities to meet

Children pointed out how they have to choose specific school activities in many cases they have to do what the school was offering for free. Many said that parents must cut in the expenses, pointing out the economic challenges at home. Children were meeting in the neighbourhoods, in the town square and the commercial centres. Many said that they were visiting their family friends and, in all cases, where friends of their parents. Many were visiting other families from different areas of the city, they accepted that there are suburban areas in which the families with less economic resources leave. Children point out that they met based on the other people similar cultural background.

It is widely agreed that they shouldn’t discriminate against others based on what they wear, which they have learned at home. The data suggest that families also tried to promote inclusive meeting points after school hours. Children in the same Year 4 class agree that their parents also invite these “different” children to their homes.

8.2. Shortage on family time and facilitation strategies at home

Some of the children express a lack of opportunity to be together with their parents due to the demanding family jobs. Many children said that they do not meet their fathers during the weekdays. The children explain that they see other children receive presents when the family does not have time to be with them due to work. They agree that material things are compensations to children who lack parental support and care. This shows that there is a social issue related to the demography of the school parents’ working conditions. To understand the relationship between the socio-demography and the school culture, we need to consider the importance of the children’s home life. At the same time, the children feel that their families support their learning at home, and they have learned routines to finish their homework, play and be together. Nonetheless, they give examples of positive values learned at home against discrimination:

"I finally got something expensive that I wanted for a long time, so my dad asks me not to post anything about it [online] because there are people in our school who cannot afford it."

This municipality offers school children in year 1–4 an after-school program called SFO (skolefritidsordning). Regarding to the children's narratives, the SFO school program and the extra-school activities both promote social activity and interaction with friends, and their personal well-being. SFO offers two hours of daily after-school activities and is free of cost for parents at this specific school. Children express that it promotes "Collaboration, play and help". Children also appreciated the outdoor area, which they describe as having: "ample outdoor space to play and run and climbing frames with a lot of fun playground equipment to play with" offering them the opportunity to "play a lot".

### 8.3. School rules, discrimination and belonging through peer relationships

In the suburban school, the school rules do not take their cultural background, ethnicity or heritage into consideration. The students do not participate in the activity plannings and neither feel part of any school meetings. Children communicate a symbolic dominance promoted by the organisational school rules that limit those who speak a foreign language, such as refugees, while the Norwegian language becomes the dominant norm. As a 4th year child in this school states:

"Everyone wants to be with the new kids, except for the ones who come from war and stuff, those who come from another country and don't know Norwegian."

This school facilitates opportunities for sharing and doing activities together. This school has implemented two national programs called Bullying-free Well-being Leaders [Mobbe frie Trivselsledere] and Homework Help [Leksehjelp]. The child participants saw these national programs as playful and promote their development of tolerance and respect. Concerning the program Well-being Leaders, the children explain that it is a Nordic program in which the representatives from each class from Year 4 to 7 are selected democratically twice a year. The children were encouraged to get involved in planning activities with a great variety of playing tools for their daily break time. As explained by the children, like "an active participant" and explain that they are "allowed to play music" in school breaks. The children also learned organised traditional Norwegian ball games, learned from older school children.

The children state that their school has clear rules, which teachers talk about. These included values against discrimination and supporting behavioural rules. These are some of the children's statements:

"Respect is an important issue"; "Do not hit, do not say bad things, friendly language, do not be rude, don't push, don't scratch someone; be friendly with friends and helps others"; "Something essential to think about is that we only have two warnings before they send a message home"; "It is forbidden to behave like a racist." "If you look a little depressed or stand with your head down like that, somebody will come over and ask what's the matter"; "A lot of people are interested in new people. Especially me"; "A person who is cool for me is really just a person who is very kind and cares about others. Someone who does not harm others to get their own will."

### 8.4. Pedagogy result on the lack of engagement in academic content

At the class level, we find that some children are critical of their teacher's pedagogy and as the children from the other school also share a variety in subjects and teachers. They comment that they learn better when they are active learners and cooperate with other children, such as when they play in a subject like maths or design and technology. These are some of the examples from the children's open discussions:

"It is not the subject itself that is boring, it is more the method we use to learn it. Just listening to someone talk instead of trying to figure things out for yourself". "Maths is more exciting than the other subjects. Because you explore things. At first you may not be able to do it, and then you have to work on understanding it. We have to use our heads".

Some children expanded on this further, describing their wish to be engaged pedagogically as they shared the boredom:

"[Learning] is not just sitting and listening to someone talk. You got to try for yourself."

We find that children like fun subjects such as "we get math games, gym, arts and crafts and group work." It is generally agreed that their teacher is there to help them if any dispute "among the children."

According to the majority of the children, it appears as if the teachers are not very engaged in the children's relationships and are generally described as somewhat distant from the community. This generates a gap between the children's wishes for a more engaging pedagogy, and the teacher's ability to address those needs.

### 8.5. Imbalance between their freedom and the opportunities for social recognition

Most children said that they were affected by the school rules' imbalance between their freedom and their social recognition. Therefore, children pointed out that as the result from their lack of representation at the school goals and overcontrolling school rules, they try to socialise with many children as possible enjoying the opportunities they have through interacting with their peers. They experience this shared strategy as positive and do not question the rules created by the adults. Therefore, children at this school foster cultural pluralism, as narrated by [Schwarzenthal et al \(2018\)](#). Children also recall getting together in the school bus as an "meeting point".

Children have a vocabulary for inclusion and a strong culture for positive relationships among peers. The children felt more connected as a group now compared to when they were the youngest children at school. The majority of the children express a feeling of belonging. It is generally agreed that children who are perceived as different mostly show challenging behaviour, not based on ethnicity, class, gender or disability. Several children also speak about acceptance; these observations can be seen in the following accounts:

"If there had been someone different, then we would have gotten used to it. It is in return it has only become commonplace". "Everyone is almost different, and everyone is well respected. No one is depressed or bullied for being different, because we are."

In conclusion, the peer-to-peer relationships show that children at this school support each other and can be regarded as an essential source for their self-identity.

## 9. Discussion

Using the children's own descriptions, this study offers a unique contribution to determining some of their daily experienced challenges in two schools in a big city in Norway. In these two case studies, children have entirely different life experiences as a result of the colour-blind cultural approaches implemented in the political and cultural context which promote segregation of children by whiteness in separate institutions, also found in Sweden as described by [Schwarz and Lindqvist \(2018\)](#). Following this critical analysis, this article points makes the local racist practices visible such as the structural benefits from white dominance and the repression of the awareness of diversity which is predominant in both school contexts ([Bonilla-Silva, 2015](#); [Christian, 2019](#); [Quinn et al., 2018](#); [Öhrn and Weiner, 2017](#)). The primary difference pointed out among children from the different age groups is

regarding the pedagogical instructions and academic demands resulting in more direct teaching and less active learning in the older age group. Concerning the urban school, children were more focused on excluding using fashion tags and more independent and selective grouping based on their knowledge of specific themes.

According to the children's conversations, the urban school is characterised by a rigid, goal-oriented, and overprotective system that results in children's discriminatory values showing a lack of empathy for outsiders. Regarding school rules, the informants present a rigid environment, where they have limited choices. We find that by investigating the children's explanations of their supposedly free play and school culture, they are casting very homogenous interests, limiting each student's individuality and generating a narrower window for their self-expressive identity (Dixon & Rousseau Anderson, 2018; Wohlwend & Peppler, 2015). At the urban school, we find that some of the mechanisms explained above contribute to further segregation, as this group of children share many of their interests. In doing so, they fit into the advantaged group's authenticity, hence reinforcing social segregation (Rysst, 2020; Schmader & Sedikides, 2018). In such an environment, children's identity becomes indistinguishable from each other, because the school community controls these children's lives and generates a homogenous school culture. Werler and Færevaaag (2017) highlight how in Norwegian schools, school tests have been used as tools in teaching. As a result of such neo-liberal measures, unfair structures in students' learning have been strengthened, as illustrated by the national school results.

Children at the urban school express a lack of culturally relevant sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017) and the children resist engagement in issues of race and racism (Zembylas, 2018). Research also has shown that it is also expected to see that parents from upper-status schools use their academic socialisation to influence their children's school-related development (Bæck, 2017). The goal-oriented pedagogy at this school can therefore be seen as an extension of the parents' social background in the school culture. Andersen and Bakken (2019) show how families with significant economic resources promote a strong culture of participating in specific extra-school activities. This urban school is ranked one of the top schools in this Norwegian city in academic performance. It seems that this is generated as a result of parents having the resources and capital for their children to succeed academically, supporting the findings of Bæck (2017) where the social background is a significant factor in determining educational outcomes in Norway. In this area, the interviews reveal that children do not enjoy learning as much as others, and they might become less active participants when they get older because of a more competitive environment. Our analysis shows that children do not necessarily feel like they are a part of their learning processes, resulting in a loss of interest and motivation to engage in the school's programs and after-school-activities. Werler and Færevaaag (2017) highlight how in Norwegian schools, school tests have been used as tools in teaching. As a result of such neo-liberal measures, unfair structures in students' learning have been strengthened, as illustrated by the national school results. There also seems to be a lack of inclusive pedagogy that accounts for disability (Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016). These children are affected by the high demands from adults, a competitive environment, and strict everyday routines. Therefore, these children tried to create various interest groups for conversation in their spare time at school. Such groups become places where sameness and exclusion of others are the norms. There is a discriminatory system against other children's differences, and their inability to live up to fashionable lifestyles, prevalent in elitist cultures discussed by Jarness et al. (2019).

At the suburban school, a school rule of not speaking other native languages, as well as the school ignoring the children's home culture, can lead to homogenisation and imposition (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Viruru, 2001). Refugee children are excluded until they learn Norwegian, they are overshadowed and invisible (Allen, 2010). Children who do not speak Norwegian are obliged to do so to be allowed to participate in

communal games and interactions. As in many hegemonical regimes (Jordens et al., 2018), there is a school agreement that children should not speak their mother tongue. They should only use the dominant national language. It is also common to use that logic in peer-to-peer discrimination (Moffitt et al., 2019). Therefore, our results align with the findings from British and French schools identified by Welply (2017) and in Denmark by Gopal (2004). At the suburban school, a lack of consideration for the children's background and the organisational rigidity becomes a "tabula rasa", meaning they are expected to start without any previous knowledge and culture. We find that the children portray informal rules interpreted by the children themselves as equality, respect, and openness to share their own identity and recognise others. They were sensitive to differences, valued encounters with other children, and showed an interest in ethical values. The majority of children express a feeling of high ethnic group identity, a sense of belonging, and support (Cobb et al., 2019). Here the children seek to see each other without prejudices. As a contrast to the urban school, this school fulfills the goal of mentoring and leadership anticipated by the national programs, as children seem to thrive through their lead-play activities.

Therefore, we find that the schools in our case study represent completely different worlds because of segregation and racialisation processes on a structural level that can be observed through the children's narratives of their everyday life in the school as an organisation. To conclude, it is important to highlight that children might be losing the opportunity to develop a healthy self-identity in Norway. In our suburban school, children express gratitude and happiness with their social relationships and play time within the school but still their linguistic, racial and cultural assets are ignored, and the system ignores their subgroup identities. In the urban school, the school culture focuses on curriculum goals and academic achievement and little on multicultural education (Nieto & Bode, 2007). Both schools reflect cases of social exclusion and repression, where challenges are becoming an individualized issue by the neoliberal construction of school evaluations or assimilation. Inequities present in the current system of schooling further perpetuate a factory model in which standardized, narrow, and universalistic conceptions of achievements are the goals. Therefore, we believe there is a need for a shift in school perspectives toward multiplicities, by refusing children "to thrive in competition" or "learn capitalist ways to disregard their own humanities" (Soto & De Moed, 2011, p. 237). Instead, we should look at a pedagogical opportunity of increasing awareness of the diversity of all children and implementing pluralistic education in which their identities are recognised (Mikelatou & Arvanitis, 2021; Nieto & Bode, 2007), promoting more culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 2014) and fostering social relationships.

## 10. Conclusion, limitations and implications

The perception of discrimination is latent in both settings in different ways. The perception of social exclusion and discrimination among the schools located in the different areas are based on the different values and resources available to the participants. In the high SES school, children feel high expectations and elitism, creating a sense of discrimination among the children. In the urban setting, social exclusion is mainly based on individual capacities and capabilities. Instead, in the suburban school, the segregation is structural of their neighbourhood, the challenging family economy and the lack of representation at the school. These circumstances create networks, and children share their motivation to value their differences and look at them as competent persons.

The data of this research suggests that urban segregation is an example of how segregation is reproduced through housing, as described by Galster and Wessel (2019). Scholars explain how multi-generational reproduction of socioeconomic status happened from grandparents to grandchildren in another Norwegian city. Urban segregation should be



both counteracted with a redistribution of resources, as well through a shift of values into a relational process of getting to know each other among communities (Puigdemívol et al., 2017). The issues call for political restructuring. The role of the municipal authorities should be called to offer opportunities and resources aiming to the mobility of schools. A system in which the interchange of experiences and culture must be implemented in which the children and family's needs to be central. Culture must be accessible and children from different areas needs to experience common activities. The visibility has to be encouraged from the educational system. It is essential to point out that the reality at the schools is different to the positive values well know policy and still, schools need to cater to the recognition of children and families, not only inside the educational organisation but also and foremost relevant to do it outside their infrastructure and structural limits. Furthermore, a culturally sustaining pedagogy should be relevant, practical, and inclusive, based on children's backgrounds, experiences and children's lives (Alim & Paris, 2017).

Regarding the study's limitations, there is only one instrument in this study. As this data was part of an extensive project in which researchers collected data from several schools in different Nordic countries, it was impossible to have the time to observe or stay longer than a week per school. The resources and time limited the use of triangulation. Another limitation was that teachers selected the children's group participation, and the school staff was biased toward the specific selection. Norwegian policy didn't permit collecting specific information about the specific families, and we are missing data about the specific SES conditions from families, ethnic backgrounds, or children's mother tongue.

In the future research implications, Like Cabrera et al. (2017), we, researchers, see the need for bridging different research fields to engage in a deeper understanding within education. Also, in combination with perspectives on race, the Norwegian educational system needs to include critical perspectives on diversity and disabilities within the existing framework of Nordic universalism. It is therefore important to investigate intersectional issues to understand the margins of oppression within the educational system (Annamma et al., 2018). The conclusion to be drawn from this study is that children seek to play freely and wish to have opportunities to develop a positive self-identity (Schofield, 2006). Schools should offer opportunities for children to grow individually, value their potential and help them succeed in a diverse society to prevent social exclusion. We find that the children in both school contexts need additional recognition. Further, we add that local schools should be part of global communities. A major focal point for schools should be how their children are prepared to live and engage in a diverse society (Kjørholt, 2013; Siegel et al., 2019). As Danielsen and Bendixsen (2019) highlight, there are families in Norway that promote the inclusive values in their children's education.

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## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Anabel Corral-Granados:** Conceptualization, Software, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration. **Eli Smeplass:** Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Funding acquisition. **Anna Cecilia Rapp:** Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision,

Funding acquisition. **Gunilla Eide Isaksen:** Formal analysis, Data curation, Supervision.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Appendix A. Children interviews guide

Guidelines for the interviewers: Groups of 3–4 children in the classes with the youngest students, 5–6 students in the classes with the oldest students. Two researchers per interview, where one researcher has the main responsibility for the questions asked and the other researcher is responsible for creating a good interview atmosphere and sound recording, taking notes, etc.

The researchers state the purpose of the sub-study – to learn more about what it is like to be a student at X-school, i.e. to hear their voices and experiences. We briefly state what kinds of questions are asked, that it is voluntary to answer questions, that we do not under any circumstances refer to names, and that data will be anonymised and used for research purposes only.

The interviews take between 30 and 60 min depending on the students' age, the size of the group and how the interview is going.

### Questions

- (1) What's the best thing about this school?
- (2) What is the worst thing about this school?
- (3) What is the most fun thing you do at school?
- (4) What is the most boring thing you do at school?
- (5) What is okay to do and what is wrong to do when you are with other students in the schoolyard?
- (6) What does it mean to be normal and different at this school?
- (7) How important is school in your life right now? Why is school important/unimportant? (Important to include everyone's voices here.)
- (8) What is the most fun thing you do after school?
- (9) What is the most boring thing you do after school?
- (10) What else do you do after school?
- (11) Is there anything else you would like to add

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