



The voices of refugee children in Norway: Coping with language barriers, outsidersness, bullying and longing

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the challenges faced by refugee children in Norway and analyzed how they coped with them. We conducted interviews with 23 children between the ages of 7 and 13. The findings showed that these children struggle with language barriers, outsidership, bullying, and longing. They utilized both personal and interpersonal resources through active and passive methods to cope. The findings indicated that the experiences of these children were influenced by larger societal structures that limited their autonomy. We recommend incorporating the perspectives of refugee children at all levels of the system to empower them and enhance their well-being.

Keywords

refugees, qualitative, coping, agency, well-being, sense of coherence, ecological system theory, children

Introduction

The number of people seeking refuge from war, conflict, and other crises has significantly increased in recent years. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, more than half of the world's refugee population consists of children under the age of 18 (UNHCR, 2021). Children are particularly vulnerable as they face various challenges related to displacement, adaptation, and integration into new societies. Exposure to conflict and displacement can have a negative impact on the mental health of refugee children. Several studies have shown that forced migration can lead to anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (e.g., Belhadj Kouider et al., 2015; Fazel and Betancourt, 2018; Henkelmann et al., 2020). Factors such as exposure to violence and resettlement challenges, including language barriers, discrimination, and limited social support networks, contribute to this (Scharpf et al., 2021). Moreover, resettling in a new cultural context requires refugee children and their families to adjust to the social norms of the host country, which can be challenging (Bergnehr, 2018). However, protective factors can mitigate these risks, such as family and peer connectedness, psychosocial support, and positive school experiences (Marley and Mauki, 2018).

In Norway, measures have been implemented to support the welfare and integration of refugee families. These initiatives, primarily targeting parents, include language training, labor market integration, and, most recently, mandatory parent guidance (Ministry of Labour and Inclusion, 2021). However, there is a current lack of initiatives directly addressing the needs of refugee children.

Children with refugee backgrounds have diverse experiences, and referring to them with a broad term like ‘refugee children’ can be stigmatizing and normative. However, children who migrate to Norway as a result of forced displacement share some common contextual factors. To better understand their subjective experiences, we use the term ‘refugee children’ when exploring similarities and differences in their everyday lives. Despite their vulnerability, it is essential to recognize that refugee children have agency and actively contribute to shaping their surroundings. Understanding these children’s needs through their experiences is crucial in developing effective measures that promote their well-being. In this qualitative study, we aim to gain insights into the lived experiences of refugee children aged 7 – 13 in Norway in order to identify the challenges they face and the coping strategies they employ. We address the following research questions: What challenges do refugee children face in Norway, and how do they cope with these? Furthermore, we seek to understand how these challenging experiences influence their well-being.

Literature review

Existing research shows that refugee children face numerous challenges. Studies conducted in Norway found that refugee children struggle with language acquisition (Daniel et al., 2020; Lund, 2024; Mathisen et al., 2024). Furthermore, researchers such as Drummond Johansen and Varvin (2020) have explored the retrospective childhood experiences of young refugee adults, finding that these children often experience feelings of isolation and disconnection, struggling to find a sense of belonging. Similarly, Archambault and Haugen (2017) found that children with refugee backgrounds often experience a conflicting sense of belonging and alienation associated with Norway and their countries of origin.

International studies have explored the challenges faced by refugee children and how they navigate them. A study conducted in Germany found that refugee youth encounter various difficulties related to their psychosocial well-being, school, friendships, housing, and discrimination. These children rely on their social support systems and resilience to overcome these obstacles (Alhaddad et al., 2023). Furthermore, a Dutch study focused on how refugee youth manage the daily stress of traumatic experiences. The study identified various resilience strategies employed by these youths, including acting autonomously, performing well in school, seeking support from peers and parents, and participating in the new society (Sleijpen et al., 2017). Additionally, a study exploring the childhood experiences of adult refugees in England and Denmark found that language-based challenges often lead to further difficulties. However, the children succeed by drawing strength from their social support systems, receiving encouragement and guidance, and integrating their two worlds into one (SAO and Todd, 2018).

The current body of research has significantly contributed to understanding refugee children's experiences. However, there is a noticeable gap in the literature concerning the perspectives and narratives of younger children. Most studies that explore children's perspectives involve those aged 12 and above (e.g., [Alhaddad et al., 2023](#); [Sleijpen et al., 2017](#); [SAO and Todd, 2018](#)). Moreover, there is an overweight of studies focusing on the perspectives of unaccompanied children ([Daniel et al., 2020](#)). Hence, there is a clear need for research that directly engages with the voices of younger refugee children younger than 12 years, allowing them to share their unique experiences, challenges, and aspirations. Such research would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of refugee children's experiences and empower them by recognizing and validating their voices and agency ([Perreira and Ormelas, 2011](#)).

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study integrates three perspectives: The salutogenesis perspective developed by [Antonovsky \(1996\)](#), The Ecological System Theory of [Bronfenbrenner \(1977\)](#), and theories of child agency that view children as social actors ([Carnevale, 2020](#); [Lundy, 2007](#)). These perspectives collectively guide the discussion of the challenges faced by refugee children and the coping strategies they utilize, which influence their well-being in new cultural contexts.

Salutogenesis is one theory used to examine the coping strategies of migrants when faced with challenges and how they respond and adapt to new cultural contexts ([Daniel and Ottemöller, 2022](#)). This approach centers on promoting well-being and empowerment, particularly through the concept of *sense of coherence*, which highlights the significance of perceiving life as comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful. According to [Antonovsky \(1987\)](#), individuals who perceive their lives as coherent generally experience greater well-being. This requires reflecting on and mobilizing one's general resistance resources, both internal and external, material and non-material. These resources are significant for individuals to lead meaningful and coherent lives ([Slootjes et al., 2017](#)). However, Antonovsky's approach has been criticized for not addressing structural conditions and being more relevant to well-educated, socially privileged individuals ([Geyer, 1997](#)). Considering interactions between children and their surroundings, the ecological perspective has been incorporated to address this critique.

The Ecological System Theory offers a comprehensive framework encompassing individual and contextual factors influencing well-being. It places the child at the center of various interconnected systems: microsystems (immediate environment), mesosystems (interactions between microsystems), exosystems (external environments indirectly influencing the child), and macrosystems (broader cultural and societal factors) ([Bronfenbrenner, 1977](#)). In relation to refugee children, this perspective guides the examination of how interactions within the children's immediate environments, like home, school, and friendships, and broader systems, such as community, institutional structures, and policy, influence their agency and well-being ([Arakelyan and Ager, 2021](#); [Hayes, 2021](#)).

It is crucial to recognize children as competent social actors, treating children as “individuals in their own right” and as “sociological equals” to adults (Alanen, 2005). Actively listening to children, creating safe spaces for them to express themselves, and taking meaningful actions based on their feedback is essential to ensure their participation rights are respected (Lundy, 2007). Carnevale’s (2020) Hermeneutical Human Agency Concept underscores the importance of understanding and respecting children’s viewpoints in decision-making. Lundy’s concept further emphasizes responsible listening and actions. Additionally, it is essential to consider the complex circumstances in which children exercise their agency or encounter limitations. According to Abebe (2019), simply recognizing children as social agents is insufficient to reveal the everyday contexts and interrelated processes through which they exercise their agency. The issue of power inequality has to be considered.

The Norwegian context

The Norwegian state supports refugees who have been granted residency to resettlement. The Directorate of Integration and Diversity (IMDI) cooperates with local municipalities to help with the resettlement. When refugee families arrive in Norway, their children are enrolled in school shortly after. These children are considered minority language students eligible for specialized language training tailored to their linguistic and academic needs. Depending on the size and requirements of the specific host municipality, the educational arrangements for these children vary between placement in a regular classroom, enrollment in an introductory class, participation in a partially integrated school program, or attendance at an introductory school. The school needs to ensure that each child is included and provided with a supportive learning environment. The goal is to integrate the child into the local school as soon as possible. While specialized training is available to children and their families, participation is not mandatory (Ministry of Education and Research, 2000).

Method

This qualitative study is part of a mixed methods project that evaluates parent interventions for families with refugee backgrounds coming to Norway: Supported Parenting Intervention for Families with Refugee Background (PIRM). The aim is to gain knowledge about two interventions and the refugee families’ experiences before they had to travel, during the travel, and after their settlement in Norway (Patras et al., 2021). In this part of the study, we focus on the children.

Participants and recruitment

We interviewed 23 children aged 7 – 13 from seven Norwegian municipalities. The participants, comprising 17 boys and six girls, primarily originated from the Middle East ($n = 18$) and Africa ($n = 5$). Most had lived in transition areas like refugee camps before resettling in Norway, with their time in Norway ranging from nine months to seven years.

The parents of these children were initially recruited through municipal services employees for the PIRM study. Recruitment materials were available in eight languages (Norwegian, English, Arabic, French, Swahili, Somali, and Turkish). Municipal employees held individual and group meetings to explain the aim of the study, and here, the families were invited to participate in interviews. Consent for the child's participation was obtained from parents. In cases where only one parent was involved in the main study, consent for the child's participation in the interview was also secured from the non-participating caregiver. Additionally, the children were asked to give oral assent at the beginning of the interviews.

Data collection

Interviews were conducted between September 2021 and June 2022, following the participation of parents in parenting groups. The interview sessions took place in municipal meeting facilities or external rooms, with transportation provided as needed. Each child was interviewed after their parents, and the waiting time was utilized to help the children feel at ease by establishing a relationship between the interviewer and the child using toys and drawing material to encourage conversation. The presence of a parent during the interview was optional, as decided by the parents and children.

The interviews were conducted in Norwegian by a female researcher with a pedagogical background (the first author), with an interpreter present. Interpreters were either certified or link workers engaged by the municipalities to connect social services with communities. In some cases, the interpreter was known to the family through the parenting intervention or the community. The interviewer did not know the children beforehand. After the interviews, the children received a small gift. The interviews lasted between 15 and 60 minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed by a professional transcript service.

Interview procedure

Before each interview, the children were briefed about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. A script with open-ended questions guided the dialogue-based interviews, focusing on the children's everyday lives in their country of origin and Norway. The scope of everyday life was given a broad conception. It included all aspects of children's lives, including family dynamics, relationships with peers, school experiences, and leisure activities, although not all interviews covered these aspects comprehensively.

Questions were presented to the children in imperative form to encourage them to respond freely. In line with the Dialogue-Based Communication Method (Gamst, 2017), the interviewer summarized the children's responses during the interview for clarification and adjustment to accurately represent their experiences.

Data analysis

The analytical process began once data saturation in the interviews was met (Zapata-Barrero and Yalaz, 2022: 413), meaning we had a comprehensive range of information about the guiding topics. Applying the Dialogue-Based Communication Method to interview different refugee children at that time did not generate significant new information. The analytical process was inspired by abductive reasoning (Mirza et al., 2014) to derive “the best explanation” for the data, guided by the theoretical framework that emerged from the data itself. In doing so, we followed the six-step model for thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Initially, the first author familiarized herself with the data by listening and reading the interviews while annotating emerging topics. Then, using the NVivo software, the interview transcripts were coded inductively, meaning codes were derived from data and named close to the children’s statements. The authors further structured and defined the themes in a collaborative process, where codes were identified individually before being synthesized across interviews to establish broader themes. These themes included Language difficulties, Outsiderness, Bullying, and Longing. In presenting the findings, we aimed for a descriptive analysis to foreground the children’s voices, as presented in the findings section. All quotes presented in the findings were translated into English by the authors.

Ethical consideration

Children’s participation in research has been criticized, especially regarding the authenticity and representation of their voices. Critics have expressed concerns that researchers’ viewpoints may influence children’s perspectives (James, 2007). However, excluding children from research can further marginalize their opinions and experiences. When conducting interviews with children and vulnerable groups, it is essential to apply adequate methods (Skivenes and Strandbu, 2006). To accommodate this, we adopted the Dialogical Communication Method (Gamst, 2017), initially developed by Langballe and Gamst, to interrogate children. This method facilitates children’s unrestricted narratives and enables them to express their perspectives authentically (Gamst, 2017: 139-148). It is widely used in contexts where children’s voices are valued (Gamst, 2017: 20).

It is essential to uphold ethical standards in research, particularly when involving groups such as children. This includes obtaining consent and assent and safeguarding the participants (Graham et al., 2015). Obtaining informed assent from children can be challenging due to their limited understanding of research procedures and the potential consequences. In our study, we informed the children through various channels, including their parents, an information folder, and at the beginning of the interview to ensure that they understood the nature and implications of the research. However, during the interviews, some children expressed a desire to change specific circumstances, such as their school situation, and asked for help from the interviewer. In such cases, the researcher restated her role in investigating several children’s perspectives about their experiences and directed them to appropriate support resources.

The presence of researchers, interpreters, and parents may potentially influence the children's responses. To address this, we emphasized the importance of direct communication with the child and maintained a neutral stance during the interviews. If parents or interpreters intervened, they were reminded to allow the child to think independently and express themselves freely. The interviewer took notes of the children's willingness to continue the interview throughout the process.

The study was approved by the Regional Committee for Medical and Health Research Ethics (Ref: 6852) and Sikt—the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (Ref: 358896). To ensure the participants' anonymity, the children's countries of origin were divided into two groups, Middle Eastern and African.

Findings

Overall, the children talked about having a calm and good life in Norway compared to their previous countries. During the analytical process, four core themes were identified: (1) Language barriers, (2) Outsiderness, (3) Bullying, and (4) Longing. In the presentation of the themes, quotations are used to illustrate the children's perspectives. Quotations have been edited to ease the readability.

Language barriers

Language difficulties were a central issue for all the children who took part in the study. Some children expressed apprehension about not knowing Norwegian when they were informed about their impending move to Norway, while others were anxious when they started school. One child stated: *"I was a bit scared"* (p. 3, 10 years), and other children shared similar experiences. Another child shared: *"...I understood nothing. Then I started to get a little scared because I had not come to Norway before"* (p.22, 8 years). The fear stemmed from not understanding anything. A few of the children had a parent already in Norway when they arrived. Of them said: *"When Dad said I was going to start school, I got nervous; I could not speak much Norwegian. He tutored me quite a lot at home before I went to school"* (p. 17, 11 years). However, most of the children faced challenges concerning language, norms, and school structure.

Initially, a few children had adult language support at school. One boy shared his experience: *"...they asked if I would like to introduce myself. Then I said no. But Maria, she introduced me. She said where I was from and my name"* (p. 1, 11 years). Having language support available was beneficial in overcoming initial language barriers. Language difficulties caused negative emotions for several children who immigrated to Norway at school age. One expressed: *"It was a bit embarrassing. I did not know much Norwegian. So, I used to be quiet"* (p. 17, 11 years). Feelings of embarrassment and loneliness influenced their behavior, such as the girl who coped by being quiet. Another child, who had been in Norway for ten months at the time of the interview, communicated through an interpreter: *"He does not understand them, and so he does not answer them back. Or he goes away..."* (p. 19, 12 years via interpreter). His coping strategy was to withdraw from social interactions with peers.

These language barriers also impacted the children's capacity to complete their schoolwork. According to one child, "... homework. Do something like that... When someone gives me a task like that, it is difficult to understand" (p. 2, 10 years). They actively sought assistance from their peers and teachers, finding it easier to ask for help than dealing with challenging homework independently. Many children relied on their siblings for help with their homework. Some children who were proficient in their native language and Norwegian provided support to their peers who had limited Norwegian language skills at school. They found it meaningful to help others, recalling their own challenges with language barriers.

For some of the older children, prioritizing learning Norwegian for an extended time resulted in a decline in their native language skills. One explained: "*My mother and I used to read it [the Quran]. But then I had to start focusing quite a lot on learning better Norwegian, so then I stopped reading it (...) I have forgotten quite a lot of Arabic because I was focusing on Norwegian*" (p. 17, 11 years). As a result, these children reconnected with their mother tongue to engage with family and read the Quran.

Outsiderness

The children entered the Norwegian school system through various pathways, which were influenced by local policies on introductory classes. Many of those who started in these classes felt isolated from their Norwegian peers. A boy expressed his experience, stating, "*Since I was not allowed to go to school until I started in third grade*" (p. 1, 11 years). This boy had previously attended an introductory class at the local school. However, in his experience, he was not allowed into the same school as the Norwegian children.

On the contrary, facing a situation where nobody shared the same language in class or school presented various challenges. For instance, a boy expressed frustration that no one else could speak Arabic at his school, knowing that Arabic-speaking children attended a different school. He viewed having a common language as a valuable asset. When asked, he believed this separation was intentional to avoid conflicts. He tried to cope, but despite his attempts to transfer to the other school with the support of his mother and seeking help during the interview, he was unsuccessful. Another child expressed a preference to be alone by saying, "*I want to be alone. I do not want to ask anyone [to play]*" (p.10, 8 years), and chose to avoid interactions with his peers by hiding in the bushes. He struggled to articulate why when asked to explain his desire to be alone.

Moreover, upon moving to Norway at school age, some children were placed in lower grade levels than their ages suggest. One child explained, "*They used to ask why I dropped a grade level. Then I said: 'It was not me who chose it. I just had to do it'. But they also said: 'Why can't you just speak Norwegian?' Then I said: 'I just came from Uganda. I do not know Norwegian'.*" (p. 1, 11 years). Another expressed frustration at being with younger children, stating, "*I think it is very childish (...) to be with the people that are younger than me. I know that Mom and Dad put me at a lower level so that I could learn more*" (p.11, 12 years). Despite the intention to provide more time to master school, this decision was not meaningful to her. She elaborated, "*I have always been so angry and sad. I have always wanted to be in the class that I am supposed to be in. And I cannot*

concentrate in school. I have learned almost nothing this year (...) because I am not attending the classes I should be attending” (p.11, 12 years). These children coped by attempting to change their situations but failed, leaving them feeling powerless and unheard.

Bullying

Several children shared their experiences of bullying, with each encounter being different. One boy was targeted for his long hair, while others described instances of verbal insults and teasing. One boy was told, *“They said I cannot do anything. I am just stupid (...) that I am a brown, like a brown cheese* (p.1, 11 years). Another recalled, *“I was bullied and teased a lot and beaten. And my stuff was stolen and broken”* (p.11, 12 years). These incidents left the children feeling profoundly sad and frustrated. One boy expressed, *“I felt like I want to go back to where I come from”* (p.1, 11 years), indicating a desire to return to a place he had previously described as a war zone.

When confronted with these difficult situations, most children mentioned that they sought help from their teacher. However, one boy noted that after he reported the bullying, it continued to occur in different settings outside school. Another boy coped by creating distance, explaining, *“I just walk away. I do not want to listen to them. And I do not want them to make a fuss about it.”* (p.18, 12, years). He coped by walking away. The children found it challenging to understand the reasons behind their peers’ misbehavior.

Other children who turned to teachers for support in dealing with bullying felt let down when they received little or no help. As a result, they became frustrated, and some coped by skipping school for extended periods. One boy shared his experience, *“I was bullied, and no one believed me. I went home and found Dad. I remember someone taking us to school. I think it was the Police... back to school, and then I said everything and after they helped me, they could believe me without the Police”* (p.8, 10 years). A girl shared, *“I do not tell my teacher anything [about the bullying]. He thinks he can address everything right away. And he believes that I will forget about it all. But for me, it is challenging to forget everything. He does not understand how I feel. I feel that just because I am a child, he thinks I will forget everything right away”*. (p. 11, 12 years). She felt misunderstood and ignored, so she stopped telling her teacher anything. The girl elaborated: *“I get scolded quite a lot for not being in class that much. I skip class. It is because I get so sad when I am inside the class. I cry a lot and hate people seeing me cry”* (p. 11, 12 years). This lack of support and understanding made her feel even worse and created a cycle of negative emotions. The girl attended therapy.

Longing

While the children appreciated living in Norway, many expressed longings for their past, particularly the time spent with extended family and friends. The older children held vivid memories of these moments, while the younger ones had learned about them through stories from their parents. For most of the children, their family members had either remained in their home country, moved elsewhere, or passed away. A boy shared his

feelings through an interpreter, stating, “...he feels very sad here because he misses his cousins and friends. Otherwise, everything is good in Norway” (p. 4, 10 years). He expressed that missing his family was the primary challenge he faced. One girl expressed a desire to return and reconnect by saying, “I want to go back and just see everyone there. I have missed everyone. I had many friends there” (p. 11, 12 years). Another girl coped by reminiscing with her parents, stating, “We often talk about how much fun it was there (...) or, usually, I am the one who talks to Mom and Dad about it.” (p. 17, 11 years). The girl initiated these conversations. In addition, several children expressed feelings of social isolation and loneliness in Norway. One boy expressed, “I remember, at least we had family there. There, we barbecued together” (p.12, 10 years). This statement conveyed his perception that the family had more meaningful connections in Africa compared to Norway.

Other children were influenced by the stories told by their parents. For instance, one child shared,

When Dad lived in Congo, Dad was so little. I was not born; they just told me. Dad had parents, but they died. They ran from the war. My Dad’s parents died, and I was sad about it. (...) they, my dad’s parents... they could have been Grandma and Grandpa, but they are not. And I was sad. (p.7, 8 years)

This child articulated her sorrow at the thought that her grandparents were deprived of the chance to be in her life. Some children’s emotions seemed entwined with their parents’ longing and grief, displaying a profound emotional connection.

Frequent relocations across different asylum reception centers in Norway resulted in multiple school changes, affecting the children’s social connections. A boy stated, “If I did not have a cell phone, I would not be able to speak to them [friends living elsewhere]” (p.13 12 years). Cell phones were described as essential for many children, not only to maintain communication with friends and family but also for gaming. However, a few children mentioned that they had lost contact with friends from previous asylum centers.

Most children longed for warmer weather and playing outdoors with their friends and family, just like they used to do in their previous country of residence. One girl expressed, “If I were in Lebanon now, then I would have been outside a lot, more outside than staying home. I would have had so much fun” (p. 11, 12 years). A boy shared, “I love my country, and I miss it. I want to live here, and I want to go back there” (p.5, 9 years). Settling in Norway left some children longing to live in two places simultaneously. Another boy expressed,

Child: I think about [country of origin] every day (...). Yes... I cannot forget it. If I forget [country of origin] one day, and remember the next day, then... then inside me, or my brain, I say to myself [foreign language], and inside my brain then... then it is like I want to hit myself, in my brain.

Interviewer: ...you want to punish yourself for having forgotten it then?

Child: Yes. I do not like to forget something that is very special to me. (p.8, 10 years)

His country of origin was highlighted as unique, and he did not want to forget it. The significance of their country of origin was evident as some children expressed longing for specific social settings such as the church and the mosque. A boy, speaking through an interpreter, shared, “*On Friday he went to the mosque. Because here they have school, and they finish at approx. 2 p.m., so he does not go to the mosque very much*” (p. 4, 9 years via interpreter). This highlights his longing for the mosque and his educational experiences there. The church and the mosque held cultural significance for some children. Moreover, most of the children fondly recalled the festive occasions and celebrations in their home country. They vividly described the food flavors and expressed how being with their extended family and friends during the Eid celebrations had been truly special and something they missed.

Discussion

In this study, we explored the challenges faced by refugee children living in Norway and their ways of coping with them. Furthermore, we aimed to understand how these influenced their overall well-being. To gather this insight, we conducted 23 dialogue-based interviews with children between 7 and 13. The children had different backgrounds and genders. However, no culture- or gender-specific challenges stood out while analyzing their accounts. The challenges faced by the refugee children were complex and embedded in different timeframes and contexts.

Our findings revealed that the participating children experienced peace and stability in Norway but also faced challenges, such as language barriers, feelings like outsiders in several settings, and bullying. Furthermore, many expressed longing for their previous place of residence, where family and friends surrounded them. The study’s findings demonstrated that the refugee children coped with these challenges using both active and passive strategies. The children primarily expressed internalized difficulties when discussing the consequences of their challenges. They highlighted stressful immediate situations in Norway and used words like scared, sad, frustrated, and angry to describe their feelings. According to [Fazel et al. \(2012\)](#), experiences such as language barriers, discrimination, and limited social networks are risk factors that can have a negative impact on the psychological well-being of refugee children. [Schweitzer et al. \(2007\)](#), on the other hand, highlight that many children with refugee backgrounds demonstrate resilience and positive outcomes in their host countries. Of these two, we focus on the latter and more salutogenic direction toward the experiences of the participating refugee children.

Salutogenesis focuses on coping strategies and well-being through sense of coherence, emphasizing the importance of understanding life as comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful ([Antonovsky, 1996](#)). However, this has to be considered from a layered perspective on how various environmental systems influence children, from immediate to broader societal levels, such as the Ecological System Theory by Bronfenbrenner. Recognizing children as active social agents highlights the importance of listening to and involving children in decisions that affect them. This approach is crucial for addressing power imbalances and ensuring children’s voices are heard, particularly in challenging situations.

On the immediate level, school and friends were highly significant topics for the participating children. However, the Norwegian language posed some challenges in that regard. It challenged their opportunities to make themselves heard, academic performances, and peer relationships at school. At home, it posed difficulties in doing homework. Interpersonal relations were crucial in helping them navigate these challenges as these general resistance resources were mobilized to cope. At home, a few children practiced the language with a parent, and most received help with schoolwork from their older siblings. At school, if available, they utilized language support from peers and adults or coped more passively by staying quiet in social situations or withdrawing from interactions. In line with [Dryden-Peterson \(2016\)](#), who emphasized the importance of providing language support for refugee children in new countries, our findings underscore the necessity for structured language support to help these children manage language barriers. Our findings indicated intersocietal contrasts. In smaller municipalities, fewer resources were available to help the children. According to Antonovsky, societies are responsible for creating environments that support individuals in developing a sense of coherence ([Eriksson and Lindström, 2006](#)).

We found that several of the refugee children felt like outsiders at school, especially when they were initially separated from the Norwegian native-speaking children. In a Swedish study, [Karlsson \(2019\)](#) reported similar findings. After spending some time in the introductory class, the refugee children generally expressed a desire to be moved to the Swedish class. In a Norwegian study conducted with unaccompanied refugee minors, [Pastoor \(2015\)](#) describes the school as a salutogenic arena for young refugees as it can provide safety, predictability, and coping resources that help foster a sense of meaning. Furthermore, [Scharpf et al. \(2021\)](#) highlight school connectedness and peer support as protective factors that can enhance refugee children's sense of manageability, one of the key concepts for developing sense of coherence. However, our findings show that the refugee children placed in an introduction offer found themselves in an uncomprehensive situation and felt disconnected from their school and Norwegian peers. We argue that this challenged their sense of coherence because the children did not understand nor find it meaningful to be separated from their Norwegian peers.

In addition, self-imposed solitude, lack of peers who speak their native language, and being placed in a lower grade level all showed to be reasons for outsidership among the children. Furthermore, some faced bullying, which they attributed to their appearance, lack of language skills, and being at lower grade levels. In line with our findings, [Arakelyan and Ager \(2021\)](#) highlight that refugee children frequently raise issues of discrimination and bullying. We argue that these findings pose significant challenges to the school, which is meant to be a safe and supportive environment that provides predictability and coping resources to help foster a sense of meaning for the children ([Pastoor, 2015](#)).

However, our findings highlighted how the participating children actively exercised their agency to improve their challenging circumstances, such as by attempting to transfer to another school and involving teachers when bullied. Unfortunately, some children experienced disregard for their perspectives, which indicated that power imbalances constrained them to take action. According to Antonovsky, this could undermine their

sense of coherence. He argued that an individual who consistently experiences that their actions have no effect or influence on the world around them will eventually perceive the world as meaningless (Antonovsky and Sjøbu, 2012: 106).

Also, within their immediate sphere, several participating children longed for friends and family and their culture and country of origin. Archambault and Haugen (2017) similarly found that refugee children in Norway yearn for their former schools and other geographic locations, but this longing was primarily for a sense of belonging. In contrast, the longing described in our study was specifically for family members and friends who previously were a part of the children's social networks. The children actively engaged interpersonal resources such as their parents and more material resources such as digital devices to cope with longing. We interpret this longing to partly be related to the issues regarding lack of participation in significant social settings and the limited possibilities to exercise their agency to change their situations.

Antonovsky (1987) suggested that how individuals deal with difficulties influences their mental health and overall well-being. In Norway, research on the coping mechanisms of refugees has mainly focused on unaccompanied minors (Brook and Ottemöller, 2020) or adults (Larios, 2023). Alhaddad et al. (2023) studied refugee children's challenges and coping mechanisms in Germany. Similar to our findings, they found that refugee children rely on social support and themselves when coping with challenges. Our findings showed how the refugee children actively coped with challenges by mobilizing interpersonal resources such as their peers, teachers, parents, and siblings. When using more passive coping strategies, the children relied on themselves to cope with challenges.

Our findings indicated that the role of refugee children changed over time and in connection to their time and experiences in Norway. Over time, some refugee children transformed their adverse experiences into opportunities for growth. For example, those who have been in Norway for an extended period took the initiative to assist newcomers. This helped new arrivals and allowed longer-term residents to find meaning and purpose in their past hardships, effectively turning them into agents of change and enhancing the empowerment and well-being of themselves and others. This active transformation of challenges into opportunities enhances a stronger sense of coherence, supported by positive interactions, which can lead to personal and communal growth. Nevertheless, it is essential for adults working with children to understand and discuss the reason behind these feelings of responsibility to ensure they are appropriate and supportive.

The children's accounts shed light on how resourceful refugee children are, especially if the necessary support is available to them, and how they actively use this support to shape their own experiences for the better. However, it became evident that decisions and dynamics within the surrounding exo- and macrosystems that did not directly involve the children limited their ability to control situations in their immediate systems. We agree with (Abebe, 2019), who argues that the issue of power inequality has to be considered. Our findings showed that the children were limited in exercising their agency in several ways, highlighting the need for the refugee children's perspectives to be incorporated into the surrounding exo- and macro levels. In line with Lundy (2007), we suggest that the refugee children's participation rights are respected by meaningful actions. Therefore, we suggest that the children's perspectives are included at exosystem levels, where they are

not present, such as areas where teachers are trained and supervised as teachers sowed to be significant resources for refugee children. Furthermore, our findings highlight the need for equal and systematic language support. The children's experiences should inform public policies formulated at the macrosystem levels. For instance, the Educational Act, regarding the initial training of refugee children and the practice of placing children in lower grade levels, showed to impact the daily lives of the refugee children. Furthermore, it is important to ensure that the information and rationale for different practices are communicated to the children and that the children are informed about the future development of these practices.

Limitations

To truly understand the experiences of refugee children, it is essential to listen closely to the stories of their resettlement process. As [Alanen \(2005\)](#) suggested, treating children as equals in society and providing them with a safe space to tell their stories is crucial. Nevertheless, it is important to note that children may tailor their responses to what they think adults want to hear, potentially leading to a social desirability bias, also in this study. However, we addressed this by emphasizing that there were no right or wrong answers, highlighting the focus on what the children found important to discuss. Children were encouraged to take their time responding and were informed that they could choose not to talk about certain topics if they preferred not to. Furthermore, the translations made by the present interpreters may be inaccurate. We tried to mitigate this risk by meeting with the interpreters before the interviews to familiarize them with the dialogue-based method and the interview guide.

Conclusion

This study reveals that refugee children in Norway face language barriers, outsidership, bullying, and longing. They employ both active and passive coping strategies, mobilizing personal and interpersonal resistance resources. However, surrounding systems often limit their ability to change their challenging situations.

To effectively support these children, prevention and intervention strategies need to adapt to a broader, more inclusive approach that extends beyond the immediate family to include schools and the wider community. Implementing a child-centered approach in service provision, particularly in educational settings, can significantly improve the well-being of refugee children. Such an approach should empower refugee children by providing accurate information and opportunities to express their opinions, thereby enhancing their autonomy. Comprehensive support integrated across all systems levels is crucial for enabling these children to successfully navigate and overcome their challenges.

Implications for policy and practice

Based on our findings regarding refugee children's coping and well-being, we recommend the following actions: (1) Enhanced education and support for practitioners: Those

working with refugee children should receive targeted education and support to better address these children's unique needs. (2) Intensified language support: Despite the good intentions of the Norwegian Education Act's mandate for specialized language training, there is a risk of exclusion. Therefore, intensified and adequate language support for children with refugee backgrounds is crucial. (3) Involvement in decision-making: Children should be actively involved in decision-making processes related to their re-settling and daily lives, with their wishes considered safely and to the fullest extent possible. (4) Continuous assessment: The needs of refugee children should be continually studied, assessed, and addressed to ensure effective integration and support.

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