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Children's rights, participatory research and the co-construction of national belonging

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Abstract: This article contributes to the debate on human rights education in diverse societies. It is concerned with the relationship between participation and the coconstruction of national belonging. Our data consists of 289 pupil texts and 33 focus group discussions in 6 upper secondary schools in Norway. The role of the school in nation-building is well-known, often emphasizing policy documents or curricula. However, it is in the interaction between pupils and their teachers that the production and re-production of the nation occurs. Participatory exercises in our focus groups functioned as pedagogical interventions, helping pupils to reflect on how they understand, discuss and co-construct national belonging. We find that the potential for co-construction of national belonging, through pedagogical interventions, depends on who is acknowledged as a legitimate participant. Notwithstanding power hierarchies, it can be argued that group discussions are concrete ways to help young people in diverse classrooms co-construct national belonging.

Keywords: youth – participation – school – national belonging – diversity

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Introduction

This article contributes to the current debate on human rights education in increasingly diverse societies. It does so by focusing on the right to participation, as expressed in article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)¹ (Lundy 2007, Osler and Solhaug 2018). The participation of young people in articulating national belonging, including any contestations or assertions linked to this concept, is of critical importance in increasingly diverse societies (Antonsich 2015, Botterill et al. 2017, Staeheli and Hammett 2013). Through this involvement, young people can contribute to co-constructing national belonging. This is because belonging whether formal, in the sense of legal status (citizenship), or informal, in the sense of feeling that you belong and are allowed to belong - is inherently necessary for human beings to prosper (Bond 2006, Wood and Waite 2011, Skey 2014). We argue that participatory techniques that actively involve young people in pedagogical interventions in schools have the capacity to foster an inclusive co-construction of national belonging in classrooms characterized by diversity (Meissner and Vertovec 2014, Martiniello 2014). Beyond this, the legal-normative framework of human rights education and children's rights obliges schools to play an active role in processes of the co-construction of national belonging among young people, within the structural opportunities and constraints of national and local contexts (Osler and Solhaug 2018). This article contributes to the debate about which concrete participatory tools can foster the co-production of national belonging in diverse classrooms; it recognizes experienced and perceived power-hierarchies, racial or otherwise, in Norway and beyond.

On the one hand, the need for social cohesion in societies with migration-related diversity is high on European policy agendas. This is based on the concern that greater differences might pose future risks (Kymlicka 2015, Wiggen 2012). On the other hand, it is well-known that migrants and children of migrants born and raised in new home countries experience challenges in being recognised as legitimate, equal members of such societies. This rejection often takes the form of ethnic, racial or religious discrimination (Gullestad 2004, Osler and Solhaug 2018, Erdal et al 2017). These two dimensions echo insights from academic explorations of belonging, which stress the relational dimension of belonging, whereby self-identification is not independent of categorization by others (Antonsich 2010). Put simply, your feeling of belonging is partly dependent on whether you are given the space to feel that you do – that you are accepted by those around you as someone who belongs. This duality in belonging – the individual and the collective – is often described in terms of 'sense of belonging' and 'the politics of belonging' (Antonsich 2010, Yuval-Davis 2006).

In this article, we argue that there is potential in – and a need for the use of – participatory and dialogical tools in today's classrooms, tools that address aspects of living together in diversity. These can usefully be framed in terms of human rights education. We draw on young people's right to participate, not least in educational settings (Lundy 2007, Osler 2016), as a human right, as it is defined in the CRC. This right can be realized through group discussions. We argue that young people can be productively engaged in the work of co-constructing national belonging (Botterill et al. 2017).

In societies characterized by migration-related diversity, the need to produce and re-produce narratives of collective, national belonging is particularly pressing (Antonsich and Matejskova 2015a, Antonsich and Matejskova 2015b, Knott 2017, Meissner 2015). The role of the school as a nation-building institution is recognised (Mavroudi and Holt 2015, Staeheli and Hammett 2013), and its relation to questions of national identity has often been examined by looking at curricula, policy documents or text books (Osler and Lybaek 2014). However, it is increasingly acknowledged that it is in the interaction between pupils, in teachers' meetings with pupils, and the oral and written exchanges that happen in classrooms, that the actual production and re-production of the nation occurs (Dusi, Steinbach and Messetti 2012, Mavroudi and Holt 2015, Osler 2011). Therefore, there is a critical need to examine pedagogical interventions that use participatory techniques and are inspired by principles of dialogue. How can they offer practical classroom solutions, and how may they sufficiently address legitimate theoretical and ethical concerns (Westrheim, and Hagatun 2015)?

Thus, in this article we ask: *How can participatory group discussions help young people to take part in the co-construction of national belonging?*

The article builds on a larger data set consisting of 289 pupil-written texts, systematic background information about the participating pupils, and 33 focus group discussions with the same pupils, from 6 Norwegian upper secondary schools. The data was collected as part of a research project on national identity in the light of increasing ethnic and religious diversity². In this article we focus specifically on

the focus group data, and within this, on selected participatory exercises which were used³.

Inspired by the notion of superdiversity (Meissner and Vertovec 2014, Vertovec 2007), or the diversification of diversity (Martiniello 2014), which foregrounds the multiplicity of identities, we approached all pupils as (potentially) Norwegian, leaving the power of defining their place in the nation up to themselves. The rationale was to *not* reproduce one particular notion of nationhood by applying our own, potentially prejudiced, understandings of who are to be considered, or consider themselves, 'nationals'. Our recruitment strategy reflects our normative position; namely, that we see the potential of schools as arenas for everyday encounters for the co-production of the plural nation (Antonsich and Matejskova 2015a, Erdal and Strømsø 2016). The focus group methodology discussed in this article was picked up by a Norwegian government-funded initiative, 'Democratic preparedness against racism, anti-Semitism and un-democratic attitudes', which works with lower and upper secondary schools (13-16 and 16-19-year olds) and provides concrete tools and a one-year program where principals, teachers and pupils actively work together⁴.

In the next section we discuss our conceptual framework. Firstly, we set out the approach we take to co-constructing national belonging. Secondly, we examine how participatory focus group discussions can enable participation. Thirdly, we discuss how our approach and methods connect with a human rights education framework; we draw especially on the CRC article 12 on the right to participate, and the role of education, following the UNDHR article 26 (2), in promoting 'understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups'. The next section describes the methods we employ and our data. We then give details of the focus group methodology we adopt and the participatory exercises. It is on this that we build our analysis and argument. We then present some of the material from the focus group discussions. Two points clearly emerge: firstly, pupils recognise that all people should have 'the right to national belonging' somewhere and in some way; secondly, pupils appreciate the experience of being part of a 'community of disagreement' (Iversen 2014, Ezzati and Erdal 2017). This material is then discussed in relation to our research question, and we conclude by reflecting on the relevance of our findings for the wider community, schools, and classroom teaching practice

Nation-building and education in Norway

Before moving on to our conceptual framework, a brief note on the Norwegian context. The educational system in Norway, as in most countries, plays a pivotal role in national reproduction (Osler and Lybæk 2014). It consists of 10 years' compulsory, free primary education, followed by free and voluntary upper secondary education (16-19 years), with programmes preparing pupils for either higher education or vocational working life. 'Norwegianness', much as nationalism elsewhere, is seen as defined by citizenship, ancestry and culture (Eriksen 2013, Lynnebakke and Fangen 2011, Vassenden 2010). The Norwegian national and education context is marked by two characteristics that might distinguish it from other European countries where recent immigration has brought about greater classroom diversity.

Firstly, Norwegian nationalism is characterized by its specific history; Norway gained independence in 1905, following centuries of union, first with Denmark (till 1814), and then with Sweden. Norway's Constitution from 1814 was

thus a step in the direction of independence. It is a nationalism characterized by a largely peaceful struggle for national independence. It is marked by a drive to construct unity through sameness. Secondly, however, this national construction has also drawn on a history which in the $20^{\rm th}$ century involved aggressive assimilationist policies towards national minorities, including the Sami population (Erdal et al 2017). This history of assimilationist policies of national minorities is largely silenced in contemporary national narratives and in discussions on migration-related diversity in today's Norway. This results in a somewhat fragmented approach to questions about the national 'we' and the legitimate criteria for national inclusion.

The Norwegian population has significantly diversified – albeit not from a homogenous ethnic and religious starting point – in recent years, and now 14% of the population are immigrants (born abroad), and 3% are the children of two foreign-born parents ⁵. The demographic make-up of different cities and municipalities varies, and whilst migration-related diversity is present throughout the country, Oslo stands out: 33% of the population are immigrants or the children of immigrants. This places Oslo alongside other European cities marked by diversity and super-diversity (Martiniello 2014, Vertovec 2007).

In this context, it is worth noting that Norway is one of the countries in Europe where the relationship between "citizen" and "national" is unresolved, in both legal and colloquial terms (Erdal and Sagmo 2017). Furthermore, there is no doubt that the chief reason for this dissonance is related to race: images of Norwegianness continue to be connected with whiteness, while the composition of Norwegian-born, Norwegian citizens of Norway continues to diversify, in racial terms (Bangstad 2015, McIntosh 2015, Svendsen 2014). Meanwhile, the Norwegian educational system is only to a very limited extent capable of dealing with the changing realities of who the contemporary national 'we' are. This has implications for the roles taken on (or not taken on) in co-constructing national belonging (Osler and Lindquist 2018).

Conceptual framework National belonging as co-constructed

We adopt a processual and dynamic understanding of nationalism which, following Rogers Brubaker, has two aspects: "nationness", the informal, contingent events that 'happen'; and "nationhood", the formal cultural and political institutional arrangements. These two aspects make up the dynamic and the changeable collectives known as "nations" (Brubaker 1994). Nations become tangible and real in everyday experience, and are simultaneously imagined and constructed, as intangible entities, in the interplay of nationness and nationhood (Brubaker 1994, 2009). A bottom-up approach to nations, as they emerge in everyday life, takes seriously both ethnic and civic dimensions, which are often intertwined in individuals' perceptions about - as well as experiences of - the nation (Erdal et al 2017, Millard 2014). Here we adopt Wood and Waite's understanding of belonging: 'a dynamic emotional attachment that relates people to the material and social worlds that they inhabit and experience. It is about feeling "at home" and "secure", but it is equally about being recognized and understood' (2011: 201). This understanding is anchored in the context of everyday nationhood (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008, Fox 2017, Knott 2017).

Whilst many studies of nations have been concerned with their origins, more recent work has focused on their changeable natures. Important elements in these

discussions centre on the relationship between top-down nation-building efforts, and bottom-up nationness, as it is lived in the everyday lives of nationals (Antonsich 2015, Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008). Drawing on this body of work, we question the idea that suggests the nation-state is somehow inherently exclusionary, whereas, for instance, cities are inherently more open and inclusive. And we also question the suggestion, often made by academics, that cosmopolitanism is a useful binary to nationalism (Antonsich and Matejskova 2015b, Rossetto 2015).

Whilst acknowledging the weight of colonial history and racial and religious discrimination, we propose that nations are emergent phenomena, which have the potential to be asserted and contested. They are subject to and the product of existing power hierarchies but, simultaneously, they are inherently dynamic. We thus argue, building on the emergent body of work on relationships between nation and diversity (complexity), that nations are 'imagined communities', co-produced by ordinary people in their everyday lives (Antonsich et al. 2016, Kaufmann 2017).

This is of the essence in the case of societies characterized by migration-related diversity, such as Norway. The question of how to foster unity and social cohesion in the school forces us to ask who is a national, and what is a nation. We subscribe to the broader human rights education premise, following article 26 (2) in the UNDHR, that education should foster a sense of shared humanity. However, we also propose that this can be compatible with the more traditional nation-building function of the school as a nation-state institution - if the nation is considered as a social group with boundaries that can be and are negotiated over time (Antonsich and Matejskova 2015a, Antonsich et al. 2016). We acknowledge that nationhood is, perhaps more often than not in today's European schools, taught in ways that suggest a static, historical, and, by implication, exclusionary image of the nation. However, it is possible for young people to participate in the co-construction of national belonging. If such participation is based on their own sense of perceived and experienced nationness, a different image may emerge.

Group discussions, participatory research and young people's participation

Focus groups are a data collection mode: they consist of a group discussion, ideally with 6-8 participants, which is 'focused' (Puchta and Potter 2004). The aim is to capture interpersonal, collective, and reflective processes, where it is not the individual per se, but rather the group's joint interactions and conversations which produce the data to be analyzed. Focus groups hold a unique potential in participatory terms, a potential that has been mobilized in development research and practice (e.g. 'participatory rural appraisal'), but also in 'participatory action research' (Cahill 2007). While participatory methods include other modes of data collection, it can be argued that focus groups provide the best environment for using collective and reflective participatory data collection tools.

Focus groups have been employed in research with young people over the past decade, including in schools. In this context, the right of young people to have a say in how research is conducted has been emphasized (Bagnoli and Clark 2010). Their participation is understood in terms closely related to the idea expressed in the CRC Article 12, where it is stressed that participation involves an *acknowledgment* of a child or young person's capability to form his or her own views, space for *expression* of those views, and a setting which *hears* the views being expressed. Focus groups, we argue, are a unique arena for young people to participate, if they are

organized to facilitate participation and there is a recognition of the power hierarchies inherent in the school setting (Cahill 2007).

School power hierarchies share some of the features of wider social hierarchies. However, there may be specific iterations, whether in relation to peer influence or the role(s) of the teacher. We may see this, for instance, in matters of religion or race, and the ways in which they are spoken about (or not spoken about). However, group discussions, involving participatory exercises, hold the potential to limit the effects of prevailing power hierarchies, to create a level playing field, if only temporarily, by following set rules-of-the-game, and adopting dialogical principles. Such principles, inspired by the ancient Greek tradition of Socrates and Plato, can today provide the basis for conversations that can foster shared understanding.

Human Rights Education and young people co-constructing national belonging

Fostering participation, as both an expression of and a means to the empowerment of young people, is a central ideal of human rights education. Facilitated and well-prepared focus group discussions can be an important pedagogical intervention in realizing such ambitions. However, it is not always easy to organize this type of activity: classes are too big; and there is insufficient time, especially the time needed to build the kind of trust needed for peer-to-peer exchanges to be honest and mutually tolerant. Given that we know that the method often matters as much, or more, than the message, when it comes to questions of diversity in school settings (Brown 2004), it seems worthwhile to pursue the pedagogical potential of group discussions.

Following Lundy (2007), young people's right to participation (article 12 CRC) contains the concept of 'pupil voice'. However, for this to be meaningful, pupils must have access to audiences, to spaces of participation, and their participation should have a tangible impact on their life-worlds. If we link the right to participation in school to the right to education (article 26 (2) UNDHR) and 'the full development of the human personality', it is pertinent to ask how schools are fulfilling their obligation in societies of migration-related diversity. The role which education, should play in promoting 'understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups' is clearly articulated in the UNDHR article 26 (2). At the same time, across Europe, there are diverging views on the definition of the nation and its boundaries, be they racial, religious, or otherwise. One the one hand, there is a recognition that definitions are fluid. On the other hand, there is a search for more cemented definitions, quite aggressively asserted in the guise of values-based citizenship education programs (Osler 2009).

Human rights education often draws on resources and ideas developed under the rubric of multicultural education, with reference to cultural diversity and an anchoring in universal human rights (Osler 2016)⁷. Meanwhile, formal and informal dimensions of belonging are not so simple to disentangle. Formal and informal dimensions of national belonging are often mutually constitutive, e.g. as seen in the UNHCR's #Ibelong campaigns⁸ that address the problem of statelessness. Arguably, if belonging is denied at the informal level there are severe implications, and it is here that the issue of young people co-constructing national belonging is relevant from a human rights education perspective. Therefore, we argue that whilst the UNDHR article 15 (1) on the right to have a nationality is clearly about formal rights (citizenship and protection against statelessness), questions of the informal co-

construction of national belonging cannot be ignored. This especially applies to human rights education in societies where there is migration-related diversity; these societies cannot ignore the fundamental interplay between formal citizenship status and informal national belonging (and recognition).

Linking the conception of nation and national belonging, as discussed above, with group discussions where young people participate, we argue that there is a potential for the co-construction of national belonging in the school arena. We do not contest the fact that, for a number of reasons, schools often fail to realize this potential. However, if there is a willingness to engage with nationness as something emerging from the lived experience of pupils, we argue that participatory group discussions can be an arena where a co-construction of national belonging can take place.

Data and methods

Our data comes from a three-pronged strategy: the systematic collection of background information from all participants; school essays written by the pupils themselves; and focus groups where 6-8 pupils from the same class are engaged in discussion. Our research participants are pupils in Norwegian upper secondary schools who are (potentially) Norwegian, though we leave the power of definition to them (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). We have not sought to compartmentalize respondents in terms of ascribed categories. However, we acknowledge the salience of, for example, race in the context of discussions on national belonging in Norway⁹. Table 1 details our data:

	Texts total	Classes (academic)	Classes (vocational)	Texts - academic	Texts - vocational	Focus groups total	Focus groups academic	Focus groups vocational	Focus groups researcher-led	Focus groups student-led	Focus groups teacher-led	Teacher responses
Oslo 1	67	1	2	26	41	8	3	5	4	4		2
Oslo 2	35	1	1	26	9	6	4	2	4		2	1
Bergen 1	63	3		63	0	8	8		2	4	2	1
Bergen 2	83	5		83	0	6	6		2	4		1
Sogn & Fjordane	23	1		23	0	3	3		3			1
Tromsø	16	1		16	0	2	2		2			1
Sum	289	12	3	237	50	33	26	7	17	12	4	7

Table 1: Data overview: texts, focus groups and teachers' responses across schools (academic and vocational).

Our sample of pupils is slightly more diverse than the national average, largely due to the fact that there were two schools in Oslo and two in Bergen, where proportions of immigrants and children of immigrants are higher. Among our research participants, 2/3 have two parents born in Norway and 1/3 do not. 23% have two foreign-born parents, and 12% have one foreign-born and one Norwegianborn parent. In the group who have two foreign-born parents, 15% have parents born in two different countries, neither of which is Norway. Among those who have one foreign-born parent, and one Norwegian-born parent, in a majority of cases parents are mixed couples (one immigrant, one not), while in a minority of cases the Norwegian-born parent is a child of migrants (i.e. one immigrant, one 'second generation') (Erdal and Strømsø 2016; Erdal 2018). This data shows the emerging superdiversity of Norwegian society, a development we also see in the 34 different countries of birth listed for our pupils and their parents. However, when we consider place of birth and citizenship, it is noteworthy that 90% of pupils in this study were born in Norway, while 96% have Norwegian citizenship (6% have dual citizenship), and only 4% do not hold Norwegian citizenship. This, arguably, underscores the need to revisit the co-construction of national belonging, in light of the growing migrationrelated diversity of European populations.

We met pupils twice. On the first occasion we introduced our research project and invited them to draw upon their own experiences in an essay: "What does it mean to be Norwegian in 2015". The pupils wrote the essay at school and at home, before we returned a few weeks later to conduct the focus groups. We also collected background information on gender, place of birth, citizenship(s), self-identified nationality, as well as parents' place of birth, citizenship(s), education and work.

As far as the focus group discussions were concerned, an important ethical consideration was how to ensure a necessary level of trust and confidentiality - the pupils would later run into each other in the school corridors¹⁰. For some pupils, Norwegian nationhood was a taken-for-granted identity, while for others it was something more contested or ambivalent. For some it was a source of patriotism (inclusive or excluding), while others did not feel a part of it. For pupils to openly discuss their perceptions and experiences, they needed to be sure that what they said in the research setting was safe.

The focus groups comprised the third stage in our data collection, and it was our second visit to the schools. This was the end of a project which, for most pupils, had lasted 3-7 weeks from our initial visit. This was a point where the significance of process in working with young people on topics of national belonging and their own roles in (potentially) co-producing national belonging became evident. The processual nature of our research and the participatory methods employed in the focus groups secured trust and created a space where prevailing power hierarchies could be challenged. This was especially evident in the participatory exercise where pupils engaged in dialogue, and worked as a group. This activity explicitly levelled the playing field.

Group discussions - a pedagogical intervention facilitating the right to participation

In this article we ask: *How can participatory group discussions help young people to take part in the co-construction of national belonging?* Below we present our focus group methodology. This draws extensively on participatory research tools, and results in a pedagogical intervention which can foster understanding and reflexivity

on how national belonging is understood, talked about, and co-constructed in present-day Norway.

In the introductory sessions, each focus group facilitator set out the rules: all views and experiences must be heard, and exchanges should remain respectful and stay within the group. The first exercise was an ice-breaker, giving each participant a voice. We asked: *Do you consider yourself a Norwegian? Why and how? Is this important to you? If so, when is it important to you?* Pupils were firstly asked to make individual notes and then share them by taking turns around the table. They were then invited to discuss the similarities and differences of the responses.

This was followed by a participatory exercise on dimensions of Norwegianness. The facilitator placed a string circle on the table. This circle demarcated the 'boundaries' of what characteristics and actions might or might not be considered Norwegian. It was purposefully made imperfect (see Photo 1), so as to signal its contingency.

A total of 25 dimensions, covering 7 broad themes, were provided (see Table 2, below) one by one, on coloured cards, and the pupils discussed how to place them in the circle (as explained below).

Can speak Norwegian			Is Christian	
Speaks Norwegian at home		'Ethnic Norwegian'	Is not religious	
Speaks a different language than Norwegian at home	Is born in Norway	'Not ethnic Norwegian'	Other religion	
	Has parents who were born in Norway	'Sami'		
Skin colour	None of the parents were born in Norway		Hangs up the Norwegian flag on birthdays	
Clothing	One of the parents was born in Norway	Holds Norwegian citizenship	Celebrates the 17 May (constitution day)	
Behaviour	None of the grandparents were born in Norway	Holds Norwegian and another citizenship	Votes in elections (national and municipal)	
Takes walks in the woods or mountains		Does not hold Norwegian citizenship	Contributes to society	

Table 2: 25 dimensions, covering 7 broad themes, potentially connected with being seen as (or not), and feeling (or not) as part of the Norwegian nation.

These dimensions were drawn from the literature on everyday nationhood and nationalism, and from a close reading of the public debate on Norwegian identity.

The 25 cards, divided into 7 themes, were, one by one, placed by the pupil who read them on the desk. They could be placed in a number of positions: outside the boundary (circle of thread), signifying something being (seen as) incompatible with being Norwegian; on the boundary itself (on or under the thread), if the group were unsure or disagreed with each other; just within the boundary (circle of thread) if compatible but not (seen as) key to being Norwegian; further into the center, if what was on the card was seen as key to 'being Norwegian'.

The group then discussed whether they agreed, and why/why not. They then adjusted the position of the card to show the collective view. There was not always agreement, but acceptable solutions were found (see Photo 1).

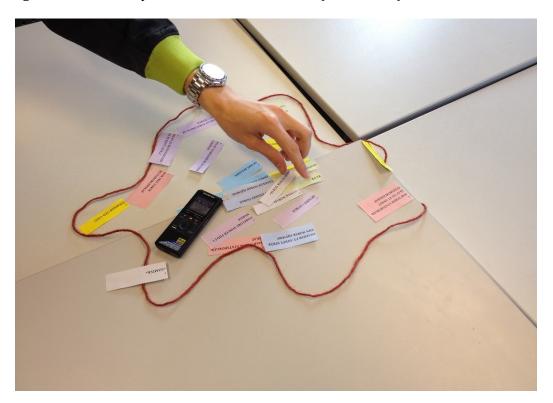


Photo 1: Example from one of the focus groups: pupils discuss the placement of dimensions of Norwegianness, within and outside an imperfect boundary (red thread circle).

The point was not the position of the card, but the group discussion about its placement. The physical action of placing the card usually led to reactions and negotiations. The only point of agreement, shared by all 33 groups, was that speaking Norwegian should be placed right in the centre; there was very little discussion about this, signalling both the salience of language and its taken-for-grantedness. This exercise took up far more time than the other activities. We had planned for this, but it took longer than we had expected, in all of the groups, as discussions took on their own dynamic.

The third exercise focused on the dilemmas of living together in diverse societies. The facilitator read out statements on a number of issues: the right of girls (or their parents) to demand gender-separated swimming classes in school; policewomen being able to wear the hijab (this has been debated but not permitted

in Norway); the balance between freedom of expression and religious freedom. This task was constructed to allow for the groups' different time dynamics; in some groups the full list of dilemmas was discussed, whilst in others some dilemmas were left out. The dilemma about freedom of speech was included in all groups, for consistency across the data set.

Because of the group discussion format, and the fact that the topics sometimes exposed personal experiences and reflections, or opinions that might be perceived as more or less 'politically correct' or acceptable to classmates, it was necessary to build in a closing component. We asked pupils to reflect individually on their participation in the project. What did they think of having to reflect on Norwegianness in their texts? How did they experience the process of thinking and re-thinking, and participating in the focus groups, doing tasks which created provocation or confirmation, and sometimes contributed to increased uncertainty, or confusion. We then asked pupils - one by one around the table - to share their key "take-aways". They mostly emphasized aspects of their own thinking which had been adjusted, changed, or become more or less important. Some mentioned being surprised by the multiplicity involved in questions of national identity, something they had previously been unaware of. Many reflected on their engagement with questions about nationality and who is/is not included, as well as how this is experienced and the associated power dynamics. The project helped them to gain more nuanced and dynamic perceptions of these issues.

The focus groups thus helped to create greater understanding and tolerance among pupils (cf. article 26 (2) UNDHR), as well as opening up ways of approaching the *national*. This, arguably, was a direct effect of the dialogic tools employed to facilitate participation in the focus groups, which themselves contributed to realizing pupils' right to participate (cf. article 12 CRC). Task 2 had an open, participatory approach that stimulated dialogue and encouraged some level of agreement, or agreement to disagree. On the other hand, task 3 had a more confrontational, categorical approach, often to politicized and mediatized questions. These two tasks brought home to us that method is just as important as content. (Brown 2004).

The right to national belonging

While the right to nationality (cf. UNDHR article 15 (1)) refers to citizenship, and the right to not be stateless, we argue that the right to nationality, or the right to national belonging, as we have chosen to call it, can – and should – be central in discussions about the nation, diversity and national belonging. This is relevant for young people, and hence for the role of the school in societies characterized by migration-related diversity. If young people are denied a recognition of belonging, it has a severe impact, and works against the chances of them being able to co-construct national belonging. Among the pupils in our research, 90% were born in Norway, and 96% were Norwegian citizens; at the same time, 1/3 had one or two parents born abroad. In such a context – what is national belonging? What demarcates its boundaries? And who has the power to define those boundaries? As the discussion below shows, for young people the question of defining national belonging is about *participation*. More specifically, it about their own voice; who hears them and how does that, in terms of nationality, define them?

This extract is drawn from exercise two, with the 25 dimensions that cover seven themes. We are here focusing on the role of language for national belonging:

Boy 1 starts exercise by reading out: 'Can speak Norwegian'

Facilitator: So, you're placing it close to the centre?

Boy 1: 'Speaks Norwegian at home' and 'speaks another language than Norwegian at home'

Facilitator: Could you please explain why you have placed the cards like this, so the rest of you can see if you agree or not?

Boy 1: Why I think, well, you have to be able to communicate, at least, to say that you belong somewhere, in a way, so I would say that to speak Norwegian is really, really, important

Facilitator: And the other two, you've placed them slightly off the centre?

Boy 1: Yes, it is a little private, for me it doesn't, you know, it doesn't matter what you speak at home.

Facilitator: Right

Boy 1: It's about how you relate to others and to what extent you can communicate...

Facilitator: Great, so what about the rest of you, any thoughts on where to place these cards?

Boy 2: Yes, the language, I agree that language is really important, so that if you, that you have to be able to speak Norwegian, and it isn't always like that, in Norway there are so many who don't bother to learn Norwegian, you know, who come from the outside and can speak English, because there are so many people who know English in Norway, the level is quite high, but I don't know, you know to define this maybe it is important to actually be able to speak Norwegian, but you can also define yourself as Norwegian even if you don't understand Norwegian, you don't have to speak it, but if you understand it...

Boy 3: You've got to have communication, you can't come, you can't not understand, or at least I feel like, that if you don't understand Norwegian, and if you don't speak Norwegian or anything, then it's maybe hard to define yourself as Norwegian, then, I don't know...

Girl 1: I thought about..., that, last summer I was in Turkey, and then I was a tourist, I wasn't Turkish because, I don't know Turkish, and then you lose that cultural thing, you lose a bit, the communication, and you feel the clear divide between those who are Turkish and those who aren't. I feel like it can be a bit like that, if you're a tourist in Norway. And if you live in Norway, the difference is, in a way, that when you want to take part in Norwegian culture, then you will also learn about what is Norwegian, to an extent, and then you don't get that clear divide between those who are Norwegian and those... and then what you speak at home, it is a private matter, it's more about your own identity again, your individual identity, and your parents, mother or father or both...

Girl 2: I also thought about the two other cards, 'speaks Norwegian at home' and 'speaks another language than Norwegian at home', even if I live under the same roof as someone who doesn't want to be Norwegian, that shouldn't have negative implications for me, who

actually wants to be Norwegian, so for me, I don't think those should matter

Boy: What's interesting about language is also that if you move to a new country, and learn a new language at the age of 40, then it is harder to learn the language completely perfectly, in a way, but if your children grow up there, they will most likely, yes then they are, well they speak completely perfectly then. I don't know how to explain it, so I agree that it's irrelevant, it's not so important whether you speak another language at home, or know other languages, or both...

The above extract demonstrates the dynamics of this exercise. Personal life experiences are drawn on and pupils reflect on language, belonging and their relationship (or lack of it) with the national community. Firstly, language – as communication – is crucial for belonging, in a relational sense. Secondly, language is more than communication, for it is also associated with culture, with being an insider (or not). Thirdly, there is a dynamism and contextuality to the pupils' reflections; languages can be learnt, and your position in the particular context matters. Finally, there is a sense that individuals' right to national belonging matters to young people, who may not be content with being defined by their parents' place of birth. But also, that their national belonging, 'wanting to be Norwegian' in this case, does not preclude simultaneously also valuing their (national) belonging elsewhere, in parents' countries of birth. This point is also underscored by the statement that any child moving with his/her parents to live in another country would learn another language, perfectly.

Whilst this does not predicate their national belonging, it opens the possibility for a changeable and dynamic conception of national belonging, which gives space for the agency of young people growing up in such circumstances.

Participatory group discussions, such as the above, may provide an arena for young people to participate in reflections and discussions about nation and diversity. Space is provided for young people's participation on their own terms; there is not only an acknowledgement of voice, but also a recognition of the importance of audiences and the implications of young people's voice and their participation (Lundy 2007). Here, there was space for co-constructing national belonging, a space that encompassed varied personal experiences of nation, diversity, languages, and national belonging.

A community of disagreement

Group discussions facilitate the participation of young people in the co-construction of national belonging. However, they are not friction-free and neither should they be. The space which the group discussion format produces, with the dynamism of participatory tasks, was one where a sense of shared fate, of collective national belonging, including elements of patriotism, was evident. There was room for disagreement, even about the nature and boundaries of the national. Such a space might be described as a 'community of disagreement' (Iversen 2014) where consensus is not required. It is a democratic interaction in which there are different combinations of comprise and consensus, of contestation and agreement (Ezzati and Erdal 2017).

When asking pupils to summarize their experiences, at the end of each group discussion, we found that our research had initiated processes, for both the individual and his/her interplay with the collective. However, this did not necessarily lead to change, or consensus on national belonging:

I think that being Norwegian depends on how you define yourself (...) but if you feel Norwegian but aren't ethnic Norwegian, and live in Norway, I feel that I cannot see you as Norwegian, even though you have that feeling.

This pupil's reflection emphasized personal feelings and physical appearance. In the Norwegian context, 'ethnic Norwegian', refers to white Norwegians with no family history of migration. Here the fact that the pupil says, 'I cannot see you as Norwegian' reflects the visual dimension of 'ethnic Norwegian' (Erdal et al 2017). A conflict over who is/is not to be seen as a national emerges. This also makes apparent the boundaries of the nation, and the different positions of power in defining who is a national. For a small proportion of the pupils, this was the end-point of our research process, and some of them had the sense that despite other pupil's feelings of Norwegianness, they could not be seen as nationals, for reasons of race and ancestry. Others reflected on new insights about what it means to be Norwegian:

I had written three sentences and ended up deleting all the points I was sure I would include, and it was good fun to reflect upon what makes me and not my neighbour Norwegian (...) Things I haven't thought about before and just taken for granted, and suddenly they aren't that important anymore.

Here change is happening, and there is an openness to plural approaches to nationhood, an acceptance of dynamism and diversity. Through individual reflection (essays) and group interaction (focus groups), a space for participation was created, and understandings and tolerance towards ideas about racial, religious and national boundaries were fostered.

A quote from an exchange between the facilitator and a participant summarized how he saw the discussion as a reflection of Norwegian society:

Participant: This debate, I think we handled it in a good way. We have different opinions, but we kept to the point. What is good about Norway is the way we don't make it personal, targeting individuals. I don't know how to explain it, but I think this was a good example of how we debate in Norway.

Facilitator: That there is space for different opinions? Participant: Yes, exactly that.

A key finding from our study was that there was a clear 'community of disagreement', even about the boundaries of the nation. Pupils had clear ideas and opinions about what was Norwegian or not, and the various degrees of importance that might be ascribed to various dimensions of Norwegianness. However, in most of the focus groups there was also a willingness to engage with each other's perceptions

and experiences, and this helped to articulate a plural conception of the nation (Erdal and Strømsø 2016). In the final round of group discussions, some pupils also reflected on the ways they had discussed nation, nationalism and boundaries of Norwegianness, and how this might (or might not) relate to broader social debates:

'It's easy to agree when we talk about these issues in a small group, at school and in a text, but it's something else when we're out in society, then you will obviously have different attitudes'

The pupil referred as much to her 'different attitudes' as to the fact that there will be a range of different attitudes in society. This shows that group discussions with one's classmates are seen as (relatively) safe spaces, no matter how much disagreement there might be. There is a clear sense that classmates share a common fate. This security is not seen as existing in the wider society, due to (assumed) generational differences, and the mediatized politicization and polarization of the debate about nation and diversity (Bangstad 2015, Gullestad 2004).

Conclusion

Let us return to the question posed at the outset: *How can participatory group discussions help young people to take part in the co-construction of national belonging?* We argue that group discussions with participatory activities can help young people take part in the co-construction of national belonging. The participatory group discussions draw upon pupils' resources and there is an acknowledgement of pupils' capability to form views about the circumstances of their own life-worlds and express those views. This process is in accordance with the terms of the CRC article 12. This approach is of critical importance, given the diversity of today's European schools; it can help to realize young people's right to participate in the co-construction of national belonging.

We do, however, recognize some challenges. Firstly, these pertain to the ways in which the concepts of nation and nationalism have already been approached: by pupils and teachers; by the school; and by the curriculum and education policy. The ways in which nation and nationalism have been traditionally approached are not easy to reconcile with a processual and dynamic understanding of the nation, which was the starting point for our group discussions. Secondly, there are practical obstacles to the extent to which small group discussions that allow dialogue-based reflection and exchange are possible in schools.

However, we believe that a human rights education approach offers a framework of opportunity. Our experience from this research process supports the findings of studies on cultural diversity awareness in schools (Brown 2004): *method may matter more than message*. Our processual approach accommodated both the individual and the collective: the written texts provided pupils with an opportunity to formulate their own thoughts, while the group discussions provided a space where these thoughts were shared with their peers, producing discussion, disagreement, and reflection. This type of pedagogical intervention has the potential to allow young people to genuinely participate. Following the arguments of Lundy (2007), this entails not only giving voice, but allowing young people's voices to matter, in their own life-worlds and beyond.

The potential for a co-construction of national belonging in the school, in Norway and elsewhere, depends on how national belonging is understood, and who

are seen as relevant and legitimate participants in such a co-construction. In the increasingly diverse societies of Europe, the matter of young people's right to nationality, their right to belong both formally *and informally*, needs to be constructively addressed. We believe there is a potential in pursuing a human rights education agenda that is cognizant of the (demographic) realities that have led to the diversity we find in today's European schools (Mavroudi and Holt 2015, Antonsich and Matejskova 2015a). The participatory techniques we employed in group discussions in the Norwegian upper secondary school highlight 'the right to national belonging' and 'the community of disagreement'. These pedagogical techniques show how teachers can concretely engage with the important, but slippery, themes of race, ethnicity, unity and diversity, as part of the process of co-constructing national belonging in the classroom.

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Notes

- ¹ CRC Article 12: 1) States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child; 2) For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.
- ² 'Negotiating the nation: Implications of ethnic and religious diversity for national identity' (www.prio.org/nation)
- ³ Other findings are discussed elsewhere (Erdal et al 2017; Erdal 2018).
- ⁴ The focus group methodology discussed here is provided as one of the tools which can be employed as a pedagogical intervention that fosters understanding and tolerance, specifically in relation to identity, diversity and national belonging: http://dembra.no/opplegg/norskhet-i-flertall/
- ⁵ www.ssb.no/innvandring (Statistics Norway, accessed 25 April 2018)
- ⁶ Our emphasis, throughout this section.
- ⁷ http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/statelessness.pdf
- 8 http://www.unhcr.org/ibelong/
- ⁹ It suffices here to note that different, more or less exclusionary conceptions of nationhood were found among pupils both with and without a family migration history. However, a majority across the board subscribed to an understanding of national belonging as something closely related to the individual's own sense of identity and belonging, and to the geographical location of their lives and life worlds (e.g., where you were born, and raised, went to school, where your friends, parents, siblings live).
- ¹⁰ Informed consent was obtained from pupils; a small number of pupils elected to not participate in the research project while the rest of the class went ahead. For pupils under 18, information was shared with parents and guardians. All but one of their teachers wanted to use the pupils' texts in their ordinary teaching and in term assessment. Pupils were allowed to choose whether or not their texts would be part of the research project. It is worth emphasizing that when teachers graded texts they looked at the pupils' ability to formulate an argument, rather than any views expressed. Nevertheless, when we analysed pupil texts we were aware that pupils knew it was not only the researchers, but also their teachers who would be reading them. This may have affected what pupils wrote, in terms of what they perceive to be 'acceptable opinions'. Retrospectively, and across the material, there appears to be little evidence of self-censorship. The posture adopted has been a reflective one.

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