Krister Björklund

Unaccompanied refugee minors in Finland

Challenges and good practices in a Nordic context

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The number of unaccompanied or separated refugee children is on the rise worldwide. Almost 13,000 asylum applications were submitted by unaccompanied minors in the EU-countries in 2013. Finland received less than 200 applications, while 3850 applications were submitted in Sweden. Most of the unaccompanied minors come from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Eritrea, Somalia and other African countries.

On the one hand, these asylum seekers are children and thus should be treated as migrants in a vulnerable situation requiring special care according to their needs, but on the other hand, the receiving countries seek to limit the number of asylum seekers, including minors. Attempts have been made to harmonize policies and procedures in Europe, but they still vary significantly between EU-countries.

This research shows that all Nordic countries have fairly well functioning reception systems based on the principle of the best interest of the child, but there are problems: fragmented organizational structures with insufficient cooperation between different administrative sectors and problems with placing unaccompanied children in municipalities which often are unwilling to receive them. There are shortcomings in providing adequate language training and education, in access to health care, especially mental health services and in following up adolescents coming of age with supporting measures. The case of Finland is highlighted by interviews with caretakers, teachers, administration professionals and former unaccompanied minors.

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Preface

The increasing number of unaccompanied refugee children on the move has drawn global attention. The unaccompanied children arrive in the destination countries without their parents or guardians, being a vulnerable group of migrants. In 2013 Finland received 156 unaccompanied children, 80 percent of them boys. Most of them came from Somalia, Iraq, Morocco and Afghanistan. The number has decreased since 2008, when 706 children applied for asylum.

It is important to increase knowledge and draw attention to this particularly vulnerable situation of unaccompanied refugee children. The well-being and protection of the children and integrating them into society is especially important. School is a central element in this. It is essential to ensure that these children are able to access and enjoy their rights and protection (Convention on the Rights of the Child, CRC).

A central goal of the Halaten–project (From vulnerable childhood to healthy and safe adulthood) has been to analyze the integration experiences of these children and youngsters who have settled in the Varsinais-Suomi -region and are now adults. The time span reaches from arrival to the present. Furthermore, caretakers, social workers, teachers and officials have given their opinions on how integration and services should be improved in the municipalities. The reception and integration of unaccompanied refugee children in Finland has been compared to Norway, Denmark and Sweden. The Institute of Migration is a member of the Nordic Network for Research Cooperation on Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (NordURM), which aims to consolidate collaboration regarding research and research training on a Nordic level.

The project has been funded by the European Refugee Fund managed by Finnish Ministry of the Interior. I thank the Turku University of Applied Sciences for coordinating the project and other participating partners for excellent co-operation and Senior Researcher Krister Björklund at the Institute of Migration for carrying out the research. The Institute's Director Ismo Söderling has given much appreciated advice during the different stages of the project. I also express my gratitude to all who have participated and to those persons and institutions who have helped to accomplish the project.

Turku 8.4.2015

Elli Heikkilä
Research Director
Institute of Migration

Introduction

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1.1 Unaccompanied minors in Europe

The number of unaccompanied or separated refugee children is on the rise worldwide: more than 25,300 asylum applications were lodged in 77 countries in 2013, much more than previous years (UNHCR 2014). There were almost 13,000 applications in the EU-28 from unaccompanied minors, continuing at much the same level as that recorded in 2011 and 2012. The highest numbers of applications were submitted in Sweden (3,850), Germany (2,485) and the United Kingdom (1,265) in 2013 (Eurostat 2014). Most of the unaccompanied minors come from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Eritrea, Somalia and other African countries. In Finland 196 unaccompanied minors applied for asylum in 2014 and almost half of them were from Somalia and Afghanistan (Maahanmuuttovirasto 2015).

Unaccompanied minors are not a homogenous group; they are differentiated by ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, cultural and religious background, age and gender (Dottridge et al. 2013). The reasons for leaving are the same as for adults: political instabilities and armed conflicts, persecution, poverty, family violence and other reasons. A combination of structural and individual factors lies behind the decision to leave home. There is no universal reason explaining how the children and youngsters end up as refugees, all stories are different. What they have in common is their plight and search for a better place to live.

The term "unaccompanied refugee minor" URM (or the shorter form unaccompanied minor) is used in this research referring to Article 2(f) of the EU Council Directive 2001/55/EC. Unaccompanied minors refer to "third-country nationals or stateless persons below the age of eighteen, who arrive on the territory of the Member States unaccompanied by an adult responsible for them whether by law or custom, and for as long as they are not effectively taken into the care of such a

person, or minors who are left unaccompanied after they have entered the territory of the Member States" (EUR-Lex 2001).

Many of the unaccompanied minors do not seek asylum in the European country where they turn up, some countries are transit points to other destinations (Shuteriqi 2014). Findings from the PUCAFREU–project (2013) showed that a significant number of unaccompanied minors had prior experiences in other countries within the EU. Departure for another country was within short or long periods of time depending on the degree of integration into and the availability of protection services. Stopping in another country than the preferred was not necessarily a satisfactory choice.

URMs cannot be considered only passive victims of circumstance; they often act as subjects and use strategies to navigate in the political, social, cultural and economic environment. Like adult asylum seekers, they do not settle in the first country that offers protection, but the country that offers the best benefits (Orgocka 2012). The decision on staying or continuing their migration is connected with the child welfare services and deficiencies in the care provided, such as access to housing, medical care and education. Lack of opportunities, legal and bureaucratic obstacles, a general feeling of better opportunities elsewhere and the influence of peers were factors causing URMs to choose a different destination than the first chosen. The unaccompanied children seek opportunities in other parts of the same country or in another (PUCAFREU 2013, 104). Asylum destinations become a function of experiences during the journey and the decision to seek asylum in a country might in the end be more or less arbitrary (Brekke & Brochmann 2014).

Examples of countries, which receive unaccompanied minors predominantly as asylum seekers are the Nordic countries, Germany and UK. In Italy and Spain asylum flows are less significant in comparison to children arriving as irregular migrants (Figure 1). The Baltic Countries and Central and Eastern Europe, e.g. the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania are transit countries with few unaccompanied minors applying for asylum (Chase 2013).

The immigration policies of the Nordic countries differ from one another. Sweden is known for its multiculturalism and liberal stance towards refugees, while Denmark is very restrictive, also when it comes to URMs. Norway and Finland are in between.

Countries receiving large numbers of URMs face many kinds of challenges. In principle all URMs, not only those who apply for asylum, are entitled to specific protection under international human rights, most notably the 1989 Convention of the rights of the child. Attempts have been made to harmonize policies and procedures in Europe, but they still vary significantly between the countries.

The European Commission Action Plan for unaccompanied minors (2010–2014), which was adopted in May 2010, states that the right of the child should

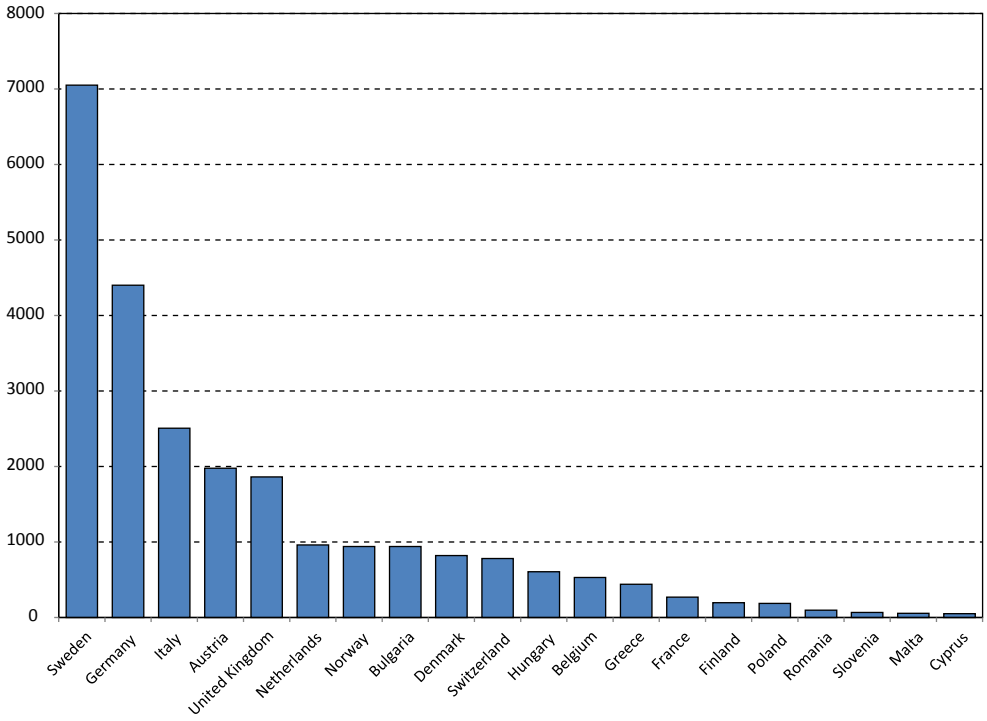

Figure 1. Asylum applications submitted by unaccompanied minors in 20 European countries 2014 (Source: Eurostat 2015).

be placed ”at the heart of any action concerning unaccompanied minors” and advocates a common EU-approach on this issue, based on the principle of the best interests of the child. A number of EU member states do not in practice adhere to these principles. In some countries, those who so not seek asylum are excluded from these rights. Some countries apply a preferred principle on reuniting the children with their families in their country of origin without thoroughly evaluating the potential risk and harm they might suffer (Chase 2013; PUCAFREU 2013).

On the one hand, the minors are children and thus should be treated as migrants in a vulnerable situation requiring special care according to their needs, but on the other hand, the receiving countries seek to limit the number of asylum seekers, including minors. The southern European countries cannot follow the principles regarding minors because of the great number of influx of refugees. As both asylum seekers and children, the unaccompanied minors fall under two separate policy frameworks. The UN convention of the rights of the child implicitly refer to subjects bearing individual rights, whereas the category asylum seekers connotes a collective of people and objectified juridical cases. Vitus and Lidén (2010) argue, that treating the child as subordinate to asylum seeker will led to very different social results than when being a child is given priority over being

asylum seeker. On the one hand the political identity of asylum seeker builds on the inclusion or exclusion from the nation state. On the other hand the category of children refers to the identity created through discourses on children's vulnerability and rights. When one of these dominate, the child's position changes. In this continuous negotiation between the position as children and asylum seekers, the positions are continuously created and reflected in discourse and practical politics.

Unaccompanied refugee minors do not fit into this policy. Being minors without a family, they are fully dependent on the child welfare services. Still, they are not unconditionally seen as children in need of care, but often as "anchor children", sent by their parents to seek asylum in order to later bring in their family.

Almost all unaccompanied minors who apply for residence permit in a European country must undergo certain common procedures including age assessment, family tracing, placement in accommodation and the assignment of a legal guardian or representative. They are given access to health services and education, either through the national care system or a separate system. There are notable differences between the European countries with respect to access to rights such as educational and vocational training opportunities (Chase 2013).

The majority of these frameworks focus on providing care until the minor reaches the age of 18 and formally adult. The legal framework and practices in this transition to formal adulthood differ considerably in Europe. There is little practice guidance on this issue on the European and wider international level. Turning 18 may in some countries cause a change in the residence permit status and generally URMs lose their right to specific benefits and entitlements they had as refugee minors, also their right to family reunification if the procedure is not completed by that age (e.g. in Finland). In those countries, where the extension of the residence permit after coming of age (18) is uncertain (e.g. in Denmark), the URMS face a stressful situation, which can have consequences for their wellbeing and motivation to integrate.

1.2 Purpose of the present study

Research on unaccompanied refugee minors in Finland was scarce in the 1990s, although they had been arriving in the country since the late 1980s. The report "Ikävä äitiä. Ilman huoltajaa tulleet pakolaislapset Suomessa" (Longing for mother. Unaccompanied refugee children in Finland) by Helander and Mikkonen (2002) sparked research interest in their situation.

During recent years the situation of unaccompanied minors in Finland has been the object for many studies and reports (e.g. Yksintulleet 2009; Heikkilä 2010; Jokinen 2010; Alanko et al. 2011; Lepola 2012; Rantakokko 2013; Björklund

2014; Policies, practices and data... 2014a; Ilman huoltajaa tulleiden... 2014). The findings show that although the reception, support and integration of unaccompanied minors in Finland generally function well, there are some challenges related to child welfare, in cooperation between authorities and follow-up of the independence process when the minor becomes adult.

The aim of this study is to analyze practices in reception and integration of unaccompanied refugee minors and pinpoint problem areas and less successful policies and propose amendments.

The results from the Halaten–project (2013–2015) provide the starting point. Experiences from other Nordic countries (Denmark, Norway and Sweden) in facing the challenges in receiving and integrating unaccompanied minors are also used in comparison to the Finnish policies. The question the existence of different hegemonic discourses about asylum seeking minors in the Nordic countries and the consequences of these is also addressed.

Unaccompanied refugee minors in previous research

2

2.1 The definition of age

Young people are institutionally defined as adults when they turn 18 (UNHCR 1997). Age and the transition to adulthood is, however, shaped by social and cultural factors. The concept of chronological age differs from social age, which is context bound and varies in time and space (Orgocka 2012). Chronological age is not quite valid in migration to a western country from a different culture, since it mirrors normative western standards. In many parts of the world coming of age is considered to happen earlier, and the young person might define her/himself as adult. There are also individual differences in the process of growing up, which can mean that a 16 year old may be more mature than an 18 year old. 18 as majority age is not a worldwide standard, several countries apply other standards to define the age of majority (Derluyn & Brokaert 2008). Since minors must be protected and cared for, young refugees obtain residence permit easier than adults and have the right to receive care and education. Thus it is in the personal interest of the young asylum seeker to define her/himself as a minor.

Authorities therefore perform age assessment, often combined with medical tests, such as X-rays of collarbones and wrists and dental examination. Although biological age cannot be exactly defined by these, age assessments are used as basis for allocating services and resources in the best interest of the child, to separate adults from minors. Social workers determine the level of support to the young person based on age; they may e.g. be placed in a foster home, institutional care or semi-independent accommodation based on these evaluations. Even though the age of 18 is a clear distinction between children and adults, the line is fuzzy and the categorization may overshadow other aspects of the young person's situation.

Search for safety is the primary concern at arrival. The hardships of the journey, often involving traumatizing events, are over but shortly after arrival in the new country the minors face new stressors in the form of interviews during the asylum procedure, age assessment, life in refugee centers and adapting to a new culture. Most of the URMs are between 15 and 18 years old, in the middle of the critical adolescent period not yet having established an adult identity. The separation from parents and family and supporting social networks contributes to their difficult situation after arrival (Derluyn & Brokaert 2008).

2.2 Mistrust and silence

There is a culture of mistrust embedded in the asylum procedure. The URMs must convince skeptical authorities that they are minors and in need of protection, not adults or "anchor children" sent by their parents to take advantage of the asylum system (Wernesjö 2014). On the other hand the young refugees for their part mistrust the authorities. An Irish study (Ní Raghallaigh 2012) found that the reasons for their mistrust stem from the earlier social contexts and experiences and are exacerbated by the present social context. It might be difficult for refugees to perceive others as trustworthy, they fear that the information they give can be used as evidence against them in the asylum process. It may also be difficult for them to establish confidential relations to professionals, because such generally lack reciprocity.

Because of mistrust it is common for URMs to keep silent about their past lives and only partly disclose information about their flight and reasons for applying for asylum, omitting facts that could weaken their cause. They might also have been instructed by their families not to reveal facts and thoughts to outsiders. Much research attributes the silence to traumatic experiences relating to their flight, silence as a way to deal with deep disturbances. There are also other reasons. Silence and secrets can also be interpreted as part of becoming autonomous and promoting a healing process. It is also a sign of "functional distrust" that allows to maintain a level of integrity that allows survival in a potentially hostile environment. Another reason is that unaccompanied minors, like any other adolescent are absorbed in their daily life and not interested in looking backwards (Kohli 2006).

The minors are safe after arriving, at least temporary, but their possibilities to decide about their own fate are very limited. They are questioned by officials and must give their stories in consistent way, which can provoke stress. Extended periods of living with uncertainty, waiting for the decision on the asylum application is emotionally distressing. In the Nordic countries this is acknowledged and the decisions on asylum are treated as urgent. The minors face a new unfamiliar

society, culture and language, and the motivation to enter the integration process learning the language and studying can be low before they know about their residence permit and undermine their confidence about the future.

According to a study by Chase (2010), the silence of the minors may be more about resisting the pressure put on them than about traumas of the past. On the one hand the systems with which they interact, social care, immigration and other systems offer safety and opportunities, but on the other hand the same systems control and limit them. The mistrust and silence can be interpreted as a desire to exercise agency when being objects in the asylum, social care, health and educations systems while simultaneously establishing themselves in the new social environment. Language and cultural barriers are also reasons for silence.

Kohli (2006; 2011) points out that the search for safety is a dominant feature just after arrival. During this stage the unaccompanied minors are least likely to feel in charge of their life course and may remain on guard and silent, watching how their stories of arrival are tested. Silence becomes a way of communicating. Unfortunately this mistrust may spill over in social relations and impair the ability of the young refugees to develop social trust. It also complicates the work of caretakers, social workers and representatives.

When an asylum seeking minor is through the process and granted a residence permit, s/he reinforces feelings of safety in everyday living, going to school, getting medical care when needed, finding adults to trust, making friends and learning to navigate the system taking care of them (Kohli 2011). Kohli (2006) observed that as trust grows the minors started telling stories of their lives before leaving. They were grateful for their new life, but felt guilty and worried about those left behind.

2.3 Vulnerability and resilience

It is common for the unaccompanied minors to have experienced traumatic events. Sandahl et al. (2013) describe three phases of traumatic experiences as predictors of mental health problems for asylum seeking minors: exposure to violence while in the country of origin, experiences of neglect, trafficking and sexual assault during the flight an finally post-migration, prolonged stay in asylum centres, multiple relocations and cultural isolation. Pre-migration traumatic experiences may be exacerbated by post-migration stress and many minors need diagnosis, treatment and preventive care. Access to these vary greatly in Europe and also between the Nordic countries.

Studies by Montgomery and Foldspang (2005) and Nielsen et al. (2008) in Denmark showed that children who had been in the asylum seeking process for more than one year showed an increasing risk of mental difficulties with the

consequence that an increased number of them needed psychiatric treatment. "Even though some children might be traumatized when they arrive to Denmark, it appears that the time of stay in the asylum system may harm their health even more" (Nielsen et al. 2008, 8).

Social workers tend to emphasize the vulnerability of the URMs and assume that they are generally traumatized because of their past hardships and loss of kinship and family networks, while underplaying their broader experiences and contexts. They have also learned how to cope in different circumstances and exercise agency. Western conceptualizations on childhood mean that minors are widely assumed to be devoid of agency. Minors are thus expected to behave in a manner that conforms to the social service providers' expectations to best benefit from support and assistance (O'Higgins 2012). As migrants, the minors are subjected to legal and administrative categorizations in contexts of power relations that favor the receiving states (Clark-Kazak 2012). If the minors express political participation and engagement, they may be considered as adults. Their lives are highly constrained, they cannot choose their place of living and they are dependent on professionals for care and support. Also the space for social care professionals to meet the needs of URMs is limited and bound by policy prescriptions. Agency is thus non-existent in policy and practice towards the URMs (Vervliet 2013). White (2012), using Ireland as an example, criticizes the reception system for taking adult understandings and transferring these onto the experiences of children. The lives of the URMs in the new country are marked by isolation and disconnection from local communities and neighborhoods, which is not supporting their mental health. It is difficult to express agency in the context of control and surveillance being isolated from local social networks.

This is reflected in research on URMs, which largely has focused on vulnerability, trauma and mental health problems such as anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and depict URMS as vulnerable, emotionally distressed and at risk, often overlooking their resilience and strength. Many recent refugee studies have shifted focus from vulnerability, to strengths, resilience and agency (Sourander 1998; Stretmo 2014; Wernesjö 2014; Lee 2012; White 2012; Vervliet 2013). Ní Raghallaigh and Gilligan (2010) found in their study of URMs in Ireland that much of the current research overlooks the protective factors and coping strategies employed.

Vulnerability and agency go together and are not mutually exclusive and opposing categories (O'Higgins 2012). Although the vulnerability shows especially in mental health problems, the minors have capabilities and strengths which help them to settle in the host country. Focusing on vulnerability limits the development of appropriate policies, support and care practices adjusted to the needs and capacities of the unaccompanied minors (Vervliet 2013; Wernesjö 2014).

Young migrants are not inherently vulnerable but become so, if their agency is restrained (Huijsmans 2012). A British study showed that young refugees may deliberately conform to expectation about their vulnerability to get greater support from service providers. While they were vulnerable in some instances, they were also conscious of their needs and rights and able to make important decisions about their lives (O'Higgins 2012).

Research has shown that refugee children live in multiple worlds and are able to cope if they retain the affiliations from the past and have people to rely upon in the present (Kohli 2011). A study of unaccompanied minors in Canada (Rousseau et al. 1988) suggested that the focus on resilience should be shifted from the individual to social space. Resilience is interaction between individuals and their environments.

Joining with others is of central importance. The fact that refugee minors are unaccompanied or separated in contrast to other minor refugees, tends to define them as individuals rather than as members of families, communities and networks (Clark-Kazak 2012). Both formal and informal networks are important. The former provide safety and structured activity; the later may help the process of adjustment. Peer groups may function as surrogate families, even when the minor has not lost contact with his biological family (Clark-Kazak 2011). Contacts to an ethnic community have proved important for providing support. Those who adapt to the new culture and maintain their culture of origin tend to integrate better. An ethnic community can provide additional support, particularly in educational pursuits (Lee 2012). Many URMs lack the support of an ethnic community, and rely on the peer contacts they have established during the asylum process. Thus it can be difficult to maintain a strong identification with the own ethnic group as well as with the host society, resulting in rootlessness.

O'Higgins (2012) has shown that young refugees should be provided with opportunities to engage in some participative group work along with the support they receive from the social services. There they can exercise their agency and also cope with their vulnerability to particular issues. Engaging in different activities, such as in clubs or sports give the minors opportunity to make friends, socialize and forget about their problems. This was also manifested in the activities organized by the Finnish Halaten–project (2013–2015).

Social support, but also religious beliefs play an important role in facilitating positive change in traumatized minors. Interventions should focus on helping the minor to access a wide range of supportive networks, support groups, voluntary work, after school activities and religious communities (Sutton et al. 2006).

Unaccompanied refugee minors have strong aspirations to succeed educationally and materially, also because the material and psychological investment the family in the country of origin has made in them. They tend to be very focused on their studies and work hard (Kohli & Mather 2003; Kohli 2006). Hopkins and

Hill (2010, cit. Lee 2012) found that a strong commitment to education and a capacity for hard work served as a buffer to risk factors and supported healthy coping strategies. Education is for the minors both a pathway to success and a demonstration of achieved success. Having autonomy to make important life decisions and choose from various life paths contributes to their definition of success. (Lee 2012.)

The aspirations of the URMs are also influenced by obligations relating to their family in the country of origin. They have a pressure to succeed, but often are expected to produce income and send remittances back home or arranging family reunification. Even when there is no precise command, they feel an obligation to be successful. Thus the pressure may have negative impact on the URM's well-being (Vervliet 2013; Stretmo & Melander 2013; PUCAFREU 2013).

2.4 Assimilation, acculturation, integration and identification

There are many definitions and classifications relating to acculturation and integration. According to Rumbaut (2001) the overarching concept assimilation consists of cultural (acculturation), structural (integration) and psychological (identification) processes. Acculturation is generally more extensive among immigrant groups. Structural integration consists of primary and secondary integration. The former refers to extensive interaction within personal networks and the latter to a wide range of integrative processes including socioeconomic and residential assimilation and the acquisition of citizenship. Identity shifts tend to be from lower to higher status groups. When social mobility is hindered by prejudice and discrimination, members of the lower status group may react by turning to their own culture and forging a reactive ethnicity.

Berry (1997) has presented a different categorization. He identifies four acculturation strategies: assimilation, when the individual is not wishing to maintain the cultural identity, separation, when holding on to the original culture and avoiding interaction with others, in the integration strategy some degree of cultural integrity is maintained, while participating in the larger social network. When there is little interest in cultural maintenance and having relations with others, marginalization is defined.

According to findings by Lee (2012) URMs had a sense of commitment to their community, culture of origin and education during the pre-migration period. Upon arrival in the U.S. these commitments remained the same, but caused the minors to be culturally segregated or marginalized. Over time they adopted the dominant language and much of the dominant culture and entered a period of assimilation

and playing much less emphasis on their own origins and culture. As the URMs entered independent living, they showed a renewed interest in their culture of origin and connection to their families of origin, marking an acculturation strategy.

Another interesting finding by Lee (2012) was that the central role and value on education was constant during this process. Their time in high school and college played a key role in this process. Education was viewed universally as a means for overcoming challenges in the pursuit of success, but also as a way to express gratitude and "give back" to society. The same was evident in Stretmo's (2014) research on URMs. The youngsters saw themselves as determined, hard-working and active subjects in many fields of life, school achievements, language training, making Swedish friends and also emphasized their own responsibility for succeeding. Accepting one's fate and being grateful and not making too much fuss was another common narration, i.e. playing by the rules.

The URMs face many barriers to achieving success, and the challenges change with time. In the beginning there are issues with legal status, then education, independent living and finally employment. Cultural maintenance and cultural adaptation are important factors in succeeding. Skills and experiences they had before arriving in their new home country are important also in the new cultural context. Sometimes these skills are, however, devalued and misunderstood. Social support is most important, even more than similarity of cultural background or age.

Lee (2012) lists five areas which serve as mechanisms for overcoming challenges: 1. Individual identity development, which largely is based on their membership in a group, a community of origin. 2. Cultural identity development, which means balancing between keeping their culture of origin while adopting the culture of the place where they live. 3. Coping skills, which partly come from their experiences before arrival and partly developed through their experiences from where they have settled. 4. Social support, which is provided by the family and community of origin, peer relationships, professional relationships (custodians/guardians, teachers, family home staff, health care professionals and social workers) and sources of spiritual strength, such as religious and faith-based organizations. 5. Education, the value of which is highly esteemed. As Kohli and Mather (2003) found:

> *"In many ways their (URM) way to learn English and to achieve academically, can be seen as a therapeutic endeavor, that helps them to find some justification for coming so far away from home, as well as providing daily structured activity as a counterpoint to periods of 'psychological hypothermia'."*

Aspirations tend to decrease over time due to the realities of life. Developing aspirations can prevent mental health difficulties, but too high aspirations can

work the opposite way if they are not fulfilled (Vervliet 2013). Compared to native-born children they face additional challenges in school, mostly due to shortcomings in their educational background and linguistic problems, but also cultural conflicts may play a role. Experiences of inclusion and exclusion contribute to educational adjustment (Oxman-Martinez & Choi 2014). Even though URMs often are found to be more school motivated than native youth, they still tend to be underrepresented in postsecondary education.

It is common to have unrealistic expectations for the future. It takes a long time to acquire the language skills to enroll in a university or college program. The URMs' expectations of becoming highly qualified and working in high status profession are mostly unrealistic, since they are not fully aware of the time and effort it takes. Learning to look more realistically at the prospects means lowering the expectations. They also run the risk of giving up on their aspirations when they realize what it takes to achieve the goals they have set for themselves (Stretmo 2014). The conceptualization of success over time is associated with acculturation and coming to terms with lowered expectation is part of the process. "Falling down" may mean return to marginalization or segregation. Thus it is very important to give attention and support to URMs also after they come of age and lose the support they had as minors.

Practices in the Nordic countries

3

The number of unaccompanied minors seeking asylum has changed over time in all Nordic countries. Sweden has observed a continuous increase of the number of URMs, while the other countries are on far lower levels (Figure 2). In 2009 the number of minors seeking asylum peaked in the whole of Europe due to the conflicts in Afghanistan, Somalia and Iraq. The next year fewer URMs came to Norway, Denmark and Finland, but in Sweden the situation was opposite. This reflects the situations in the countries of origin, but the restrictions taken in immigrant policy in the Nordic countries around 2010 may also have been a reason.

In the Nordic countries the discussion on asylum policies has often been linked to the welfare system. Although the links between immigration, integration and welfare state policies are strong in Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Norway, the countries have quite different approaches to immigration and integration, especially refugees. A large proportion of the newcomers have proven difficult to integrate in the Nordic labour market, which is characterised by high demands for skills. Thus political support for immigration restrictions has increased in all four countries. General social policies are targeted at the overall population, and it also sometimes benefits immigrants to a higher extent than the majority, because many of them have a more precarious situation on the labour market. The Nordic countries have reacted by tightening the immigration policies, Sweden remaining the most generous and Denmark the most restrictive (Brochmann & Hagelund 2011).

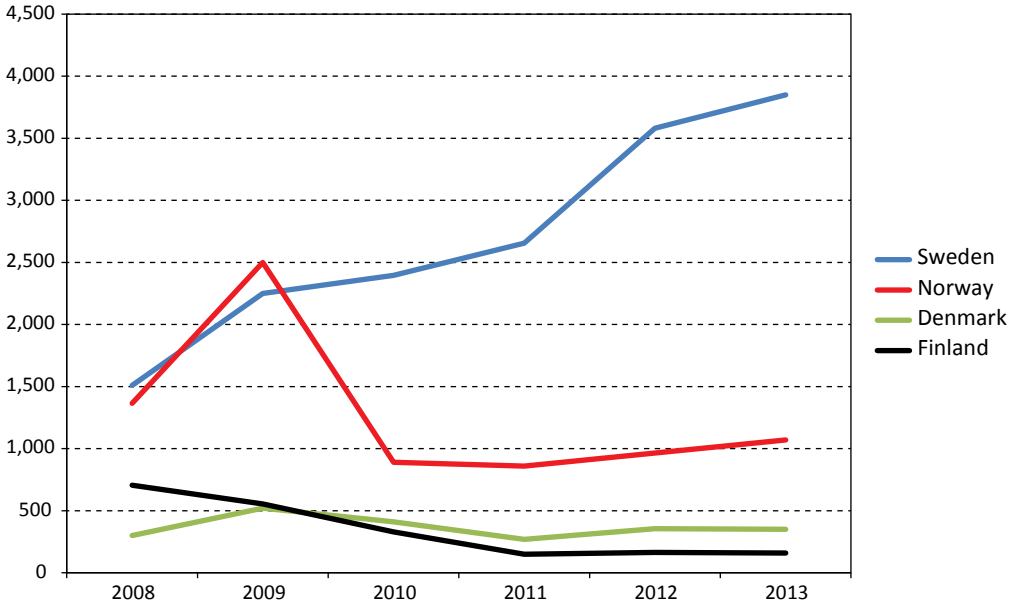

Figure 2. Asylum applications submitted by unaccompanied minors in the Nordic countries (Source: Eurostat 2015).

In Sweden, in 2014 a total of 7,049 asylum applications were filed by unaccompanied minors and 75 % of the applications processed resulted in residence permit. Denmark, in contrast, applies a strict immigration policy. In 2014 unaccompanied minors filed 838 applications for asylum. In year 2013 a total of 122 asylum decisions were made in Denmark, of these 51 positive (41 %). In Norway the number of asylum applications in 2014 were 1,204 and 814 decisions were made, of these 716 positive (88 %). In Finland 196 unaccompanied minors applied for asylum in 2014, 78 decisions were made and 64 (82 %) got a residence permit (Migrationsverket 2015; Ny i Danmark 2014; UDI 2015; Migri 2015). (These numbers do not correspond to the yearly number of asylum seekers, due to the processing time of applications).

Not all unaccompanied refugee minors, who arrive seek asylum, but there are in practice no other residence permits they could apply for, so non-applicants are not formally registered. The gap between the total number of unaccompanied migrant minors and the number seeking asylum is particularly big in the Mediterranean countries, which are transit points to the rest of Europe (Chase 2013). There are no statistics on how many unaccompanied minors arrive and stay illegally in the Nordic countries, but there are numbers on how many disappear. According to the Swedish Migration Board 1 465 unaccompanied refugee minors have disappeared since 2010 (cit. Aftonbladet 11.2.2015), in Denmark around 10 % of children disappearing from asylum centres has been reported (Muižnieks

2014), in Norway 107 URM disappeared from the reception system in 2012 (Lidén et al. 2013) and in Finland 10 asylum seeking minors went missing in 2013 (Policies and practices 2014). One important reason for the disappearances is negative decision on the asylum application.

3.1 Denmark

As a general rule, unaccompanied minor asylum seekers must meet the same requirements as other asylum seekers in order to have their application processed in Denmark. Unaccompanied minor asylum seekers are, as in all EU-countries considered a particularly vulnerable group, and special guidelines apply: Their applications will be processed quickly, and that they are upon arrival housed in special accommodation centres with specially trained staff (Ny i Danmark 2014).

Unaccompanied minors will only be required to apply for asylum, if they are deemed sufficiently mature. If the Immigration Service assesses that an unaccompanied minor is not mature enough, a residence permit can be granted without the child being required to go through the application process. In order to qualify for a residence permit, the unaccompanied minor may not have any family for support or access to public care or similar in the country of origin.

If an unaccompanied minor is granted asylum, the residence permit is initially limited to a period of 4 years. The minor can apply for an extension when it is about to expire. When turning 18, s/he can apply for a permanent residence permit if s/he meets the requirements.

If an unaccompanied minor is granted a residence permit as an unaccompanied minor under the Danish Aliens Act, the residence permit will normally be granted for one year, depending on the age of the unaccompanied minor. After that s/he can apply for an extension.

The changes in the Danish Aliens Act that took effect in January 2011 caused that residence permits are only given until the unaccompanied minor reaches the age of 18. After this point, the person will normally have to leave Denmark. A continued residence permit can only be granted as an exception. With regard to family reunification, the Aliens Act has become one of the most restrictive in Europe. The underlying reason for changing the legislation was the Danish government's assumption that the unaccompanied refugee minors in reality did not need help, but was sent to Denmark by their families to acquire residence permit, and in the long run family reunification in Denmark. In practise, however, no minors are being returned, although the Danish law allows for the return of minors to a reception centre in the country of origin, even when family members cannot be traced (Teilberg Jørgensen 2013; On the move 2014).

Teilberg Jørgensen has analysed if the amendments 2011 are contrary to art. 3, art. 6 and art. 22 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). She concludes that the rule changes are not directly contrary to the best interest of the child. However, the rule changes caused that the unaccompanied minors face a waiting period of uncertainty while awaiting repatriation at the age of 18. This is not in line with the CRC about the best interests of the child. It is harmful to their well-being and mental and social development and also limits their willingness and capacity to acquire education and integrate in society. Furthermore, when the residence permit expires, the minor no longer has access to legal representation, which limits their possibilities to explore all the alternatives provided for in the Aliens Act (Teilberg Jørgensen 2013).

The best interest of the child is not clearly defined in the CRC. The responsibility to implement the best interest principle is first and foremost that of a State. Within the framework of their respective child protection systems, states should utilize appropriate procedures for the consideration of the child's best interests (UNHCR 2008). The child's best interest is interpreted differently in different countries. Denmark has chosen to include repatriation to the country of origin in the best interests, even though it has more to do with immigration policy and contradicts the comment of the Committee on the rights of the child (2005): "Non-rights-based arguments such as those relating to general migration control, cannot override best interests considerations." In principle, however, this does not apply to those above 18 years of age, because they are considered as adults. Considering that the children live in a kind of limbo, even though Denmark adheres to the CRC-principles, this policy is criticizable.

As a result of the large increase in the number of refugees seeking asylum in Denmark, the Danish government presented a draft law in 2014 to regulate immigration flows. The proposal includes a temporary protection status to refugees if the need of protection is an armed conflict or the like. Family reunification is possible only if the one year residence permit is extended. The temporary residence permit will be withdrawn if the situation in the home country improves (SCEP 2014).

Asylum seekers residing temporarily in Denmark are required to live at an asylum centre while their application is being processed. If an asylum seeker receives a final rejection of his/her application for asylum, the asylum seeker will be required to live in an asylum centre until he/she leaves Denmark or is deported. Special centres are provided for unaccompanied children seeking asylum and asylum seekers with special needs for care, such as in the case of severe illness.

The Danish Immigration Service is responsible for providing accommodation at asylum centres in co-operation with several partners, usually the Danish Red Cross and municipalities, who are responsible for the day-to-day operation of the asylum centres.

Every unaccompanied minor is appointed a personal representative as soon as possible after the arrival in Denmark. The Immigration Service asks the Danish Red Cross to recommend a representative to the Regional State Administration, which will appoint the representative. The representative may not be affiliated with the immigration authorities, and can be a relative or other private individual. The tasks of the representative include offering support to the unaccompanied minor during the processing of the case, for example by accompanying the unaccompanied minor during the asylum interview. The representative will also support the unaccompanied minor on a more personal level (Ny I Danmark 2015).

After getting a residence permit, the unaccompanied minor is transferred from the asylum centre to a municipality and given a custodian until they turn 18. The child can be placed in residential care, in house- or flat-share with other unaccompanied minors and with support from educated staff. Some children are placed with extended family members, while others get to live alone in a rented room or flat with adult support. Their preferences are taken into account.

The integration law places the primary responsibility for the integration at the municipality. The municipality can choose to offer the unaccompanied minor an integration plan. Since the minor is expected to leave Denmark when turning 18, such plans aim at providing a good basis for resettling in the home country. The integration plan must be drawn before the 18th birthday (Ny i Danmark 2015).

The unaccompanied minors have the same access to education as all other children in Denmark. At first they attend special classes in school and study Danish and gradually attend common education depending on their competence. In practice their options are different because of the limited duration of the residence permit. For some minors primary school is the best option, vocational training for others. The aim is not primarily integration into Danish society, but preparation for return. Initially, the child studies Danish on level 1, but passing level 2 is a prerequisite for higher education.

Because the unaccompanied minors have no family to support them, they run the risk becoming socially isolated. A report highlights this (Den gode modtagelse 2015) and recommends that they should be given opportunity to keep the social network formed in the asylum centre and have local contact to other minors in the same situation. Local networks of volunteers, associations and study groups also facilitate the integration in the municipalities.

Denmark has been criticized by the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe that considerations relating to migration control tend to have primacy over the best interests of the child in actions and decisions affecting children in the context of asylum and immigration. The authorities should treat the best interests of the child as a primary consideration. The commissioner states that the Danish legislation on asylum-seekers and immigrants needs to be revised in order to ensure better protection of their human rights. Due to its legal

exceptions from the European Area of Freedom, Security and Justice, Denmark along with the United Kingdom and Ireland has no obligation to implement any EU legislation regarding URMs, including the 2008 Return Directive (Muižnieks 2014). The Danish government responded to the critic in a lengthy answer, refuting the claims of not adhering to the principle of the best interest of the child (CommDH/GovRep(2014)6).

3.2 Norway

Norway differs from the other Nordic countries being a member of the Schengen cooperation and the Dublin regulation, but not a member of the EU. Thus only part of the EU-legislation relating to migration is binding for Norway. The Reception Conditions Directive, for instance, is not binding (Staver & Lidén 2014).

As a reaction to the peak in the number of URMs seeking asylum in 2009 the Norwegian government introduced a number of restrictive measures. The most important of these was that those asylum seekers between 16 and 18 years old who did not qualify for refugee status or permit on humanitarian grounds, but could not be repatriated for the sole reason of lack of proper care in the country of origin, only received a temporary, non-renewable residence permit, which would expire when they turned 18. The practice was implemented in 2009 for limiting the number of asylum applications raising much critic from NGOs and other commentators.

The Immigration Act lists child-specific forms of persecution as conditions for asylum and also emphasizes the best interest of the child as fundamental in the assessment for residence permits for humanitarian reasons. According to the Immigration Act unaccompanied minors who apply for asylum may obtain either refugee status or a permit on humanitarian grounds. Because of their particular vulnerability and the best interest of the child principle, a residence permit on humanitarian grounds is more easily given minors than adults. These form the basis for a permanent residence permit, which may be issued after a three-year period (Vitus & Lidén 2010).

The unaccompanied child is given a lawyer to assist him/her in applying for asylum. The lawyer's duty is to help the child prepare for the interview. The lawyer then examines the interview to make sure that everything in the statement is correct. If the application for asylum is refused, the same lawyer has to help the child with his/her appeal. The minor also gets a representative at the time of the registration of the asylum claim, who shall ensure that all decisions are made in the best interest of the child, ensure that the child is heard and gets suitable care, housing, education, language support and health care. The representative

does not have responsibility for the day-to-day care of the child. When the minor obtains a residence permit and is settled in a municipality, a new guardian will be appointed (Staver & Lidén 2014).

Minors, as other asylum seekers, may appeal to the Immigration Appeals Board in case of a negative decision and stay in Norway while their appeal is considered. They may remain in a reception centre, but their weekly allowance is reduced and those aged 16–18 lose their right to access education.

The practical living arrangements for URMs is divided into two systems, one for those under 15 years old and another for those between 15 and 18. The former are the responsibility of the Office for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufetat), and are offered residence in a special care centre for minors in accordance with the Child Welfare Act. As for the later group, the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) is responsible for providing accommodation, while they wait for the decision of their asylum claim. This is regulated by the Norwegian Immigration Act and is not different from that concerning adult accommodation. The practical responsibility for running these centres has been delegated to three different kinds of operators: municipalities, NGOs and private companies. After the asylum decision, the unaccompanied minor is settled in a municipality or must leave Norway. Children under 15 are settled in a municipality with proper care within three months of obtaining asylum. Living in a care centre is voluntary, but receiving allowance and other material provisions is conditional upon residence in a centre. Norwegian municipalities are sovereign when it comes to deciding on the number of refugees to accept assistance (Staver & Lidén 2014).

Minors have the same access to health care as Norwegian children. Access to secondary health care is also in principle equal, but not always in practice. Municipalities have differing practices, especially when it comes to psychiatric health issues for those URMs who are in the Dublin procedure and for those with temporary or no residence permit (Lidén et al. 2013).

Children under age 16 staying in Norway for more than three months have a right and duty to education. This is the duty of the local municipality and in practice URMs are registered at local schools. Recently arrived minors attend introduction classes before transferring to a regular class after one year. Additional language instruction is also offered (Sletten & Engebrigtsen 2011). URMs of the age 16–18 have a right to high school education if they have a residence permit, if not, the access to high school education is discretionary and decided by the county and thus varies from place to place. Those 16–18 of age who have not completed primary education before arriving in Norway receive education in separate classes, usually in special centres alongside education for adult asylum seekers and settled refugees (Staver & Lidén 2014; Lidén et al. 2013). The access to schooling for this group is not guaranteed in Norwegian legislation, and is thus stricter than other countries with respect to EU regulations (Rydin et al. 2012).

Although the Norwegian reception system can be considered generally adequate, there are some shortcomings. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has expressed concern over the two-tiered structure expressing, that URMs aged 15–18 should be transferred to the child welfare services. Lidén et al. (2013) have pointed out that for this age group, to which most of the URMs belong, the standards in the reception centres are consistently below those in centres run by child welfare services for the younger group. The URMs who have limited permission to stay until they turn 18 and those whose asylum application is rejected have insufficient access to education and their allowance at most barely covers their living expenses. This puts them in a limbo situation with uncertain future prospects. Those URMs who only get temporary permits until maturity may stay long in the reception facilities, and many of them disappear just before they turn 18. Generally, these groups face a difficult and unsecure future. If they are still waiting for a decision to their asylum claim when they turn 18, they will be moved to an adult reception centre and lose access to the education provided for URMs. Those who have obtained a residence permit in Norway and are settled in a Norwegian municipality are allowed to remain in their special accommodation until they turn 20 years old (Staver & Lidén 2014).

3.3 Sweden

Sweden is the favourite destination country in the EU for unaccompanied minors claiming asylum. Their number has increased for eight consecutive year to around 7,000 in 2014. The main countries of origin were in 2013 Afghanistan and Somalia, and in 2014 Syria and Eritrea. 80 % were boys aged 13–18 (Migrationsverket 2015).

The main legislation on asylum and immigration is the Aliens Act (2005:716) and the Aliens Ordinance (2006:97). In January 2010 the Aliens Act was amended, with aimed at adapting the Act to the Qualification Directive and the Asylum Procedures Directive. The child's perspective is stressed in the legislation and based on the UN Convention on the rights of the child.

The Swedish Migration Board has the main responsibility for the reception of asylum-seekers and for examining applications for asylum and residence permits. The Board assigns the minor to a municipality, which arranges accommodation and care for the minor. The reason for this division of responsibilities is that the municipal social services have the best skills, experience and support required to take care of children.

The minor is placed in a designated reception municipality as soon as possible. County Administrative Boards (Länsstyrelserna) negotiate with municipalities

on the reception of unaccompanied minors. The municipality where the minor is found is initially responsible for care and accommodation of the minor, usually in a designated transit accommodation, until the Migration Board assigns another municipality for the continued care of the minor. If the minors stay in the reception municipality for a long time, s/he might feel settled there, and another uprooting is not good for the integration process (Backlund et al. 2012). The first preferred municipality is one to which the minor has ties, e.g. relatives, the second choice is a municipality with a reception agreement (Migrationsverket 2013).

Before 2014 unaccompanied minors were assigned to local municipalities on the basis of voluntary agreements between the municipalities and the Migration Board. Due to the large increase of the number of URMs coming to Sweden recent years and a serious shortage of places in the municipalities, this model was revised so that the Migration Board can assign a URM to a municipality even without the municipality's consent (Migrationsverket 2015). The issue has been debated for long, since some municipalities are more restrictive than others for various reasons. There have been negative reactions from the local population, especially in small towns, sometimes for xenophobic reasons (Rydin et al. 2012b).

Accommodation may be provided in a children's home which may be special housing established specifically for reception of unaccompanied minors or comparable, existing housing for other children or a family home. A family home can be with a relative or other close person. It can also be a private home without relationships to the child which the social services has secured.

Most municipalities have chosen to operate children's homes for unaccompanied minors, referred to as HVB housing (hem för vård och boende). Older unaccompanied minors may be placed in independent accommodation, supported by a visiting social worker. Sometimes such apartment housing can be part of HVB housing. HVB homes are run by the municipality or by private owners under supervision of the Health and Social Care Inspectorate and special regulations apply with regard to staffing and documentation

An unaccompanied minor is appointed a guardian as soon as possible to act both as legal guardian and custodian of the minor. The guardian has both the right and the duty to decide in all matters pertaining to the unaccompanied minor's affairs, whether personal, financial or legal. After the decision about a residence permit is issued, the social service in the municipality where the minor is staying must investigate whether the minor should be provided with a specially appointed custodian. Unaccompanied minors can in principle be granted the same protection statuses as adults. There is no specific protection status only for unaccompanied minors.

Family Tracing is a high priority. If the investigation and assessment of a minor's personal grounds for asylum conclude that there is no risk for persecution

or other need for protection, the main approach is to reunite the minor with their parents in the country of origin as soon as possible.

Unaccompanied minors have access to public health care equally to the one offered to all Swedish minors, even when they are not considered residents. There are, however, regional shortcomings in the access to health care, especially in mental health services and psychiatric care (Ensamkommande barns... 2013).

The minors are offered access to education within 30 days after arriving in Sweden and attend regular schools. The school system does not differentiate between different types of newcomers, which means that children with different backgrounds and recently arrived children are taught together. When needed, the newly arrived spend a period of time in special introductory classes where they study Swedish as second language, are taught on Swedish society, customs and rules. In some municipalities they attend an ordinary class with special help. School is compulsory for the children who have residence permit.

Minors have the right to attend upper secondary school. Those, who do not qualify for secondary education can continue in primary school for two years, or attend an introductory program. Usually these minors are 15–17 years old and choose the language introduction program. In the big cities with many recently arrived are introduction schools with hundreds of pupils, while smaller cities may have designated classes (Ensamkommande barns... 2013; Rydin et al. 2012b).

When the URM turns 18, his or her residence permit is not changed or withdrawn. However, if this age is reached before decision on the permit is taken, the need for protection will be examined as an adult. It is the responsibility of the municipalities to support the young person when turning 18. The practical measures differ between municipalities. There can be "half-way houses" and different forms of open activities to facilitate the transition. The housing can be part of HVB housing and operated by the same organization and the apartments can be situated near the institution. If the young person is object of a care program under the Social Services Act, the measures in the program continue and the social services are responsible for him or her up to the age of 21 (Policies, practices... 2014b).

In some cases the unaccompanied minor's parents and/or siblings can get residence permit in Sweden. For family reunification, the applicant and the family are given the opportunity to have DNA analysis performed to verify the purported biological kinship, if the rest of the kinship investigation is not enough for a residence permit to be granted (On the move 2014). Family reunification is a long and tedious process, and only around ten percent of the URM have succeeded in getting family members to Sweden (Ensamkommande barns... 2013).

3.4 Finland

The yearly number of unaccompanied refugee minors seeking asylum in Finland has fluctuated between 100 and 700 during the last 30 years. In 2014 their number was 196 and almost half of them were from Somalia, and Afghanistan (Maahanmuuttovirasto 2015). It is estimated that the total number of present and former URM in Finland is around 4,000 (Björklund 2014). As in other European countries, most asylum seekers are boys aged 15–17 years.

Almost all of the URMs who arrive in Finland seek international protection. A small number of them go missing every year. According to available information 21 minors went missing in 2011–2013, all of them asylum seekers. They have disappeared for various reasons and in different stages of the asylum process, and they tend to be at the upper end of the age range. Occasionally, Finnish authorities have learnt that a disappeared minor has sought asylum in another state (Policies, practices and data… 2014a).

The number of unaccompanied minors seeking asylum peaked in 2008. There were many reasons for this, mainly the situation in their countries of origin, but as in the other Nordic countries, it was largely assumed that the prime motivation for minors to apply for asylum in Finland was them being sent by their families in order to later apply for family reunification. At this time Finland was the only EU country which refunded the travelling costs for family members who were reunited with the minor in Finland (Yksintulleet 2009).

A report initiated by the Ministry of the Interior (Näkökulmia turvapaikkapolitiikkaan 2009) proposed several new restrictions of the Finnish asylum policy. The revision of the Aliens Act came into force 2010 and according to Section 6A a medical age assessment may be carried out to establish the age of a sponsor or an alien applying for a residence permit if there are reasonable grounds for suspecting the reliability of the information the person has given on his or her age. It is not intended to be an automatic practice, but is most typically used in cases where an applicant claiming to be a minor is suspected of being an adult (Policies, practices and data… 2014a; Aliens Act 6a § 2010).

Family reunification became considerably more difficult with the changes in legislation. According to section 38 issuing a residence permit on the basis of family ties to an unmarried minor child requires that the child is a minor on the date when the residence permit application is decided. (Aliens Act 38 § 2010). In practice family reunification became extremely difficult, because there are practical obstacles for the family to apply for residence permit, since they must apply at a Finnish embassy abroad. The financial costs including travel can be considerable, and the minor can come of age before the application is decided upon. In 2013 only one application for family reunification was successful, the number of refusals was 156 (Ilman huoltajaa tulleiden... 2014).

These amendments of the Aliens Law led to a drop in the number of unaccompanied minors seeking asylum. The consequences of the change in family reunification practice for the URMs in Finland were disappointment, feelings of isolation and even mental problems (Björklund 2014).

Generally unaccompanied minors file their asylum applications inland. The asylum application must be filed in person with the police or to the border control authority as soon as possible upon arrival in the country. The police or border guard conducts an asylum interrogation to establish the minor's identity, itinerary and method of entry. If the age stated by the asylum seeker raises doubts and cannot be determined on the basis of documents and interview, the police or border guard submits a request for the assessment of the asylum seeker's age.

After this, the application is transferred to the Finnish Immigration Service for processing. Until 2014 the Immigration service also determined which member state was responsible for examining the asylum application of the minor, but according to the Court of Justice of the European Union (2013) when an unaccompanied minor with no member of his family legally present in the territory of a Member State has lodged an asylum application in more than one Member State, the State responsible for examining it will be that in which the minor is present after having lodged an application there.

Unaccompanied minors can be granted asylum or subsidiary protection. In these cases a continuous residence permit (A) is issued for four years. It is also possible to grant humanitarian protection which entitles to a residence permit for one year. Other grounds for a residence permit are also investigated: compassionate grounds, victim of trafficking and residence permit because the minor cannot be removed from the country. In all decisions that concern a child under 18 years of age special attention shall be paid to the best interest of the child and to circumstances relating to the child's development and health (Aliens Act 6 § 2010). Thus, if an asylum seeking unaccompanied minor is not entitled to international protection s/he is granted a residence permit on compassionate grounds. In practice, this permit is issued more easily for minors than adults if there are no grounds for international protection. An unaccompanied minor is not returned to the country of origin if it has not been possible to ascertain appropriate reception conditions, this is not considered to be in the best interest of the child. This temporary (B) residence permit for one year has not been issued in years, although legislation allows it.

The Finnish government has in September 2014 given a proposal for a change in the Aliens Act concerning return of asylum seekers who have not got international protection but who cannot be returned because the country of origin refuses to receive the person or there are technical reasons to execute the expulsion. The proposal means that the current practice of granting a temporary residence permit would be terminated and the person could be ordered to leave "voluntarily".

NGOs fear that this change would force more asylum seekers to go underground (Hallituksen esitys… (2014); SCEP 2014).

Usually unaccompanied minors give a reason for leaving the home country and the motivation for coming to Finland to seek asylum. The final destination has not been clear to all children at the time of leaving their home country during the journey or even when arriving in Finland. Unaccompanied minors admit more often than adult asylum seekers that their motivation for the entry into the country to be economic reasons and the desire to receive education in Finland (Policies, practices and data… 2014a).

During the asylum process, asylum seeking minors live at group homes for minors in connection with reception centers, or supported living units intended for minors. The reception of URM seeking asylum is coordinated by the Immigration Service. Group homes are maintained by the Finnish state, municipalities and the Finnish Red Cross.

The home files an application for a representative upon the minor's arrival. Before the representative is appointed the minor is given opportunity to express preferences with regard to the representative. Accommodation, daily care and education are the responsibility of the reception center where the minor is registered.

The representative exercises a guardian's right in all matters of the minor, except for daily care, education or other looking after the minor. When a child has attained the age of 15, s/he gets a parallel right to be heard and gets a right to e.g. sign for reception allowance or pocket money applications.

The representative's duties cease, when the minor turns 18, moves permanently away from Finland or is appointed a guardian or another legal representative or is registered as an adult in the Register of Aliens during the asylum process. This also is the case if the guardian of the child moves to Finland.

The representative participates in both the asylum interrogation at the police or the border guard and the asylum interview at the Immigration Service. A child who is at least 12 years old shall be heard before decision making, but also a younger child may be heard if s/he is considered sufficiently mature. In practice the Immigration Service hears all unaccompanied minors. The average time for processing asylum applications is 174 days, but unaccompanied minors' applications are processed with urgency.

After receiving a residence permit, the minor is usually placed in a family group home, which provides a homelike environment. The purpose is to give the minors the skills and knowledge preparing for future independent living. They are entitled to receive pre-primary and basic education, and also motivated to seek secondary education and training and acquire a profession. A URM who has turned 16 can also be placed in supported housing.

Minors who have been granted international protection and are registered in a municipality have the same rights to public health care as minor Finnish citizens

resident in Finland. The manner in which health care services are arranged for them may, however vary. Approximately one third of the URMs are traumatised and display various psychiatric symptoms. The availability of mental health care services is not up to standards and only about a third of them have received treatment for their symptoms.

All children, including URMs of compulsory school age have the right to basic education. If there is suspicion that the minor is an adult, a place at school is not arranged before the age assessment has been carried out. Municipalities may arrange instruction preparing for basic education for those students with an immigrant background, whose language and other skills are insufficient for studying in a basic education group. The aim of the preparatory instruction is to teach Finnish or Swedish and provide necessary skills so that the minor can attend basic education. Instruction is supported in the student's mother tongue and supported by classroom assistants, school social workers and cultural interpreters. The group homes or family group homes help the minor with homework and keep in touch with the teacher. One of the aims of the education is to promote integration into Finnish society.

A client plan is drawn up for all URMs by an assigned social worker together with the minor. It charts the minor's situation and the need for services and measures in the best interest of the child. Additionally accommodation units make a plan for care and upbringing.

Before the minor comes of age, an independence promotion plan is drawn up at the accommodation unit. This is done at least six months before the 18th birthday so that there is enough time for preparing for practical issues in independent living, spanning from contacts to authorities to doing the laundry.

Coming of age does not have any significance with regard to residence permit. When a minor applies for a residence permit extension after turning 18, the applicant's situation is not re-examined, the continued residence permit is granted on the same grounds as before. It is not considered reasonable to refuse the extension, because s/he has already integrated into Finland. This practice is based on official practices, not legislation (Policies, practices... 2014a).

The coming of age of unaccompanied minors provides similar challenges as when any young person becomes an adult and moves away from home. The big difference is, that there is no family providing financial or emotional backup, this is provided by the municipality of residence as after care and support until the young person is 21.

After the minor finishes comprehensive school and compulsory schooling ends, s/he registers at an Employment and Economic development office, where an integration plan will be drawn up. Normally, the maximum duration for an integration plan is three years. In some special cases, the plan can be extended to five years. This plan is aimed at supporting integration, employment and social

inclusion. Financial support in the form of integration assistance is paid for the duration of the integration plan. If the person does not take the measures included in the plan, the integration assistance can be withdrawn and financial assistance restricted to unemployment allowance (Policies, practices... 2014a).

The situation of an unaccompanied minor older than 16 is challenging. S/he is not longer of compulsory school age, but might not have completed primary school. Primary education must in these cases be provided in special classes for adults. Without a completed primary education and sufficient command of Finnish or Swedish it is practically impossible to get a job or secondary education.

3.5 A comparison

There are many similarities in the reception and care taking of URMs in the Nordic countries, the biggest difference being Norway and Denmark giving residence permits only to the age of 18, while the status of the minor is not changing in Sweden and Finland at 18. Otherwise all the important practices relating to the best interest of the child are present: they have a right to quicker asylum process, they are appointed with guardians/representatives, placed in designated accommodation, they have access to proper health care and education. The organizational and administrative systems for taking care of the URM differ between the countries. Finland has perhaps the most complicated system with many actors on many levels involved. Coordinating special units for minors at a national level and seeing to the children's' best interest had been challenging due to the polarization of administration. There has been difficulties in cooperation and the duties of different authorities require clarification (Policies, practices... 2014a).

Regarding family reunification, the principle of the best interest of the child has been interpreted somewhat differently in the Nordic countries. The European Commission's Action Plan for Unaccompanied Minors (2010) emphasizes a durable solution. This may take the form of return and reintegration in the country of origin, granting a legal status allowing children to integrate in the country of residence or return and reintegration in a third country where the parents are resident.

The ERPUM–project (European Return Platform for Unaccompanied Minors 2014) started by the Swedish Migration board in 2011 together with the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Norway, where Denmark and Belgium participated with observer status, was partly based on the aforesaid Action Plan. The cooperation group behind the project also invited Finland to join a Geneva meeting in September 2010. Finland participated in the meeting, but only after having voiced concern about the post-pilot policy and funding, and then decided not to participate in the project (Lemberg-Pedersen et al. 2013).

ERPUM was aimed at ”developing methods and contacts in order to find the parents of the minors who must return home, but also to find safe and adequate shelter in the country of origin” (Migrationsverket 2015). The project was, however, at its core a “Return Platform” unlike the Action Plan, which contemplated the alternatives for unaccompanied minors. Contacts were established to cooperate with the governments, international organizations and NGOs in Afghanistan and Iraq in offering “post-return support” to the deported minors and in constructing reception facilities. Children were only supposed to remain in these so called “welcome centres” for a couple of weeks until family reunification could be accomplished.

The project faced much criticism for rather than promoting the best interest of the child it had an implicit agenda to deter children from Afghanistan to take long dangerous trips to seek protection in Europe. The Afghan officials involved in the project were not overly enthusiastic over it, and did not see why it was not in the best interest of the children to live in Europe rather than in Afghanistan (Lemberg-Pedersen et al. 2013). ERPUM ended in 30 June 2014 without any concrete results.

It was an example of using the best interest of the child in order to legitimize rejections of URMs to being reunited with parents. The problem was, that reunification may not be the best solution, since countries like Afghanistan and Iraq cannot provide minors safety. Being reunited with parents is often a loss of families’ investments and an end to their hope of a child educated and working in Europe (Lemberg-Peedersen et al. 2013). The ERPUM–project has not been followed up, and the Nordic countries rather choose to let the minors stay in the country on humanitarian and compassionate grounds.

Finland has employed partnerships with the International Organization of Migration (IOM), International Social Services (ISS) in family tracing, voluntary return and and reintegration (Safe & Sound 2014). The Finnish Parliament has in March 2015 made an amendment in the Aliens Act (HE 170/014) concerning voluntary return. It has been criticized for making voluntary return an obligation and increase the number of undocumented migrants in the country (Vapaaliikkuvuus 2015). It may also increase the risk of URMs absconding from reception/care facilities.

Although all Nordic countries claim to base their politics concerning unaccompanied minors on the principle of the best interest of the child, migration control generally tends to overshadow it. The differences in discourse between the Nordic countries relate to the question of return and if this can be considered to be in the best interest of the child. The efforts to promote voluntary return and reintegration in the country of origin (or a third country) indicate compromising ”best interests” in favour of migration control.

Unaccompanied refugee minors in Finland, findings from the research project

4

4.1 Method

In order to evaluate and single out problem areas in the reception and integration of unaccompanied refugee minors, I conducted thirteen interviews with young people in the Turku area in southwestern Finland, who had a background as unaccompanied refugee minors. The interviews were conducted between September 2013 and January 2014. I also interviewed eight social workers and administrative personnel. The main findings based on the interviews were published in 2014 with the title ”Haluun koulutusta, haluun työtä ja elämän Suomessa. Yksintulleiden alaikäisten pakolaisten kotoutuminen Varsinais-Suomessa” (I want education, I want work and a life in Finland. The integration of unaccompanied refugee minors in the county of Varsinais-Suomi). The focus of the project was regional, but many of the findings have relevance on a national and international level. This chapter draws on this earlier research and widens the scope by some reinterpretation of previous data and by bringing in additional information obtained in later discussions with professionals and administrators.

The interviewed former URMs came from Afghanistan, Bosnia, Ethiopia, Iraq and Somalia. Ten of them were men and three were women. All but two were in their early twenties and had arrived in Finland between 2007 and 2010. Two were in their forties and had arrived in the beginning of the 1990s. Most of them were somewhat seclusive about certain aspects of their lives and experiences, but because they had volunteered for the research project, they were motivated to provide information.

The main themes of the interviews were:

- Arrival in Finland and first social contacts, cultural issues
- Living in a reception centre, group home and family group home
- Peers, friends, leisure time and hobbies
- School and education
- Coming of age, moving out and living independently
- Entering the labor market after completed education
- Problems and worries
- Aspirations and plans for the future, making a family

4.2 The arrival period

Most young persons were not willing to talk about their past and arrival in Finland. There are many reasons for the silence, as discussed earlier. It was thus not possible to draw any conclusions of how the past experiences had influenced their new life. An Afghan boy 21 years of age told me his story:

> *When I was two, my family and I fled the war in Afghanistan to Iran, where I grew up. It was not our country, however, and when the situation in Iran got worse and the situation in Afghanistan improved, we moved back. Life there was hard and war came to the place where we lived. We couldn't go back to Iran and did not want to go to Pakistan, where the situation is bad. The only choice was to try to go to Europe. When we reached Turkey, we got separated from each other. My parents had bad luck and was taken by the police and sent back to Afghanistan. I succeeded to get to Greece. (Man, 22 years old)*

It took him a long time to travel through Europe. In Stockholm he met a relative, who put him on the ship to Turku, where he applied for asylum. Like many other URMs, he had no plan to come to Finland, he just found himself in the country by a twist of fate.

> *I didn't know anything about Europe. I hadn't travelled anywhere on my own. When I came to Finland it was Christmas and snow everywhere, I had no idea in what town I had arrived, Turku or Helsinki. Then I just applied for asylum and they put me in the reception centre.*

There are many reasons for the young persons keeping their stories to themselves. The earlier mentioned reasons, traumatic experiences, functional distrust, part of growing up, were all present in the interviews. This was confirmed by the interpretations of the professionals working with URMs:

> *You don't always have to look for the reasons in torture or trauma. Often the reasons are of a less dramatic, common kind. (Administration professional)*

> *I have talked with some youngsters about this, some say that they have forgotten what happened during the journey, but the memories are returning. Typically they have just been put on the ship with nobody to meet them here. They have reported to the customs office or to the police station and applied for asylum. But they don't want to talk about how much the family is in debt for their journey. I think that they are forbidden to talk about it, because smugglers might get revealed and so it can even be dangerous to talk. (Counsellor)*

4.3 Living between two worlds

Coming to a foreign country with a different culture not being able to understand the language is a bewildering experience. Being separated from the parents they worry about them. They miss their families and in combination with traumatic experiences the consequences may be somatic and psychological symptoms (Helander & Mikkonen 2002; Mikkonen 2013). Thus active forgetting can be a method to protect themselves (Jokinen 2010).

> *Usually they keep a facade not revealing what goes on inside, but every now and then they suddenly feel an urge to talk, at times even for a couple of hours, telling about what is going on in their home country... Afterwards they have regrets and feel bad about it and suffer from nightmares. (Caretaker)*

> *All of them have some kind of traumas. The journey itself may have been traumatic, not to mention what they have witnessed in their homeland. When we see that a youngster has mental problems we arrange psychiatric help... Often they miss their families so much that they can't sleep. (Caretaker)*

> *Many have psychosomatic problems, they might be so severe that going to school is impossible. They feel pain in their whole body, and a medical examination may*

show nothing. The girl might look healthy and ok, but suddenly must support herself on a walking stick because walking has become so painful. (Caretaker)

Still the interviewed professionals characterized the URMs as being basically tough. According to Carlson et al. (2012) distinguish between three sources of resilience, which allow URMs to adapt to a new cultural environment. These sources are a positive outlook, use of healthy coping mechanisms and religiosity, and connectedness to prosocial organizations. Individual factors include high intelligence, easy temperament, good coping and problem solving skills, female gender and faith or religious orientation. Family factors and attachment to at least one parent are central to resilience. Close attachment to other adults, social support and institutions such as school and church have proved protective.

The URMs live between two worlds without support from their family or relatives, a situation quite different from other young immigrants of their age. They are also between childhood and adulthood facing an unknown future. New social contacts cannot replace the family left behind.

It was hard in the beginning, different culture and language. I was alone, had no life. Nobody understood what was in my heart, except my friends. The social workers were good and nice. We learned little by little to get by on our own. (M, 23)

My life started in the Pansio reception center. There I had everything. It was difficult at first because I didn't understand any language... I was young, it was cold and dark, I was alone without any relatives and I felt really bad. I had no choice but this. I had to do my best for my family even though I didn't know anything of their whereabouts and they did not know where I was. For two years. I couldn't go anywhere, didn't know the language, had no money, no passport, nothing. (M, 22)

Shortly after arriving in Finland the URMs are quite isolated from the surrounding society. The social contacts they have are limited to peers in the same situation and social workers and caregivers. Making friends is very important for them, and although the relation to the latter is characterized by authority relation, they are also important part of their emotional network and act as surrogate for their own family.

When I got my residence permit after a few months I moved to a family group home, where I lived for two years and almost three months. If I remember correctly, life was very easy, even though my biggest problem was missing my family. I mostly felt alone, but there was no problem because there was always a caretaker or social worker to turn to for advice. We had no big respon-

sibility for our lives. I had many friends from the reception centre. We eat and watched tv together. Life was really good... I use to joke that I'd move back if it were possible. (W, 20)

Almost all of the URMs I interviewed had some kind of contact to a parent or other family member in another country, which is a source for strength and comfort, but may also be a burden. A son or a daughter who lives in a European country is commonly expected to be well off and financially contribute to the family left behind. Sending a child to another country is often seen as an investment. Two interviews illustrate this:

When I came to Finland, I often phoned mom, which was very expensive. The social worker did not help me to pay the telephone bills and I got in financial trouble. Somehow I finally managed to pay... Now I phone a few minutes about every second month, I cannot afford to phone her more often. I keep in contact, because it comforts her to hear that I'm well... I have many relatives back home who ask me for money, but I do not send. I only have one mother, so I must help her when necessary. I can't afford to buy her new furniture or something like that, but when she needs money for food, I send her... She thinks that everything is easy here and money falls from trees... I can't afford to send much, like hundreds of Euros. It's small sums, something like twice a year. When I graduate and find work I hope to be able to send more money, but not now. (W, 21)

I can't go anywhere, can't buy anything, I must save money even though I don't have a job. But when I have money somehow, I must send them. That's my problem, I have a little brother and my father is old and has no job, my mother is old too. It's difficult, but somehow I'll pull through. (M, 22)

The young persons who participated in my research had been in Finland for four years or more, but still many of them felt being in a marginal situation between two countries. The interviewees who had come already in the 1990s as unaccompanied minors felt well-integrated, even though the first years had been tough because the Finnish reception system was not yet geared to take care of minors. They had suffered from hostility from the majority population much more than those who came later and said that those URM who arrived in recent years have it very easy compared to their situation after arrival.

We would have needed some kind of support person. I was young and didn't know any Finnish. There should have been a (reception) system like there is now. My girlfriend helped me with all practical things in life. I wonder how those who didn't have anybody managed? They must have had a much harder time.

> *We did not receive any Finnish training at the reception centre. Then later, at the adult education centre I learned Finnish. (M, 45)*

Half of the URMs I interviewed had felt like being adults when they arrived, even though their chronological age was below 18. There were some differences between genders: the girls said that they did not feel adult upon arrival, but all three of them had integrated well, had an education and a profession. Of the ten boys three showed signs of marginalization, not having a proper education or jobs. According to a teacher:

> *There are differences, many of those who came here to study face big challenges. Part of them adapted to Finnish society, but then there were those who didn't. Among those (in our school) 17–18 of age, many have had problems, even criminality, prison sentences and drugs ... The youngsters who came from Afghanistan around 2005 have integrated extremely well, for what I know, but among those who came in 2008–2009, Kurds, Iraqi and Iranians were many difficult cases. (Teacher)*

4.4 Adapting and integrating

Loneliness and isolation is one of the greatest problems of the URMs. It is common for them to feel isolated from other people and from their origins and past (Kohli & Mather 2003, 207). Having no family present, they seek belonging to social collectives and places. Because it is difficult for them to make friends with native Finnish youth, it is common to turn to others in the same situation. The unaccompanied minors share the experience of being newly arrived in Finland. Even though they originate in different countries and cultures, not sharing a common language, the relationships with other young refugees and particularly other unaccompanied minors that they live with are important to them. Like other youth they mostly establish friendships with others of the same gender and age (cf. Wernesjö 2014).

Most of the young persons who participated in our research project (Björklund 2014) had a very international friends network, only two of them had mainly friends of the same ethnic origin. It was common to make long lasting friendships already in the reception center and the group home or family group home. This confirms to Lee's (2012) observation that youngsters preferred groups where the members had similar experiences.

The group home and family group home provide an environment where the young people can feel at home and develop belonging with peers and staff. Feeling at home is connected to close social relations, familiarity and creating bonds

to the place where they live and helps to overcome the feeling of being ”strangers in a strange land.” The family home helps the young persons to integrate and become part of the local society. The problem is, however, that contacts to the local native population tends to be scarce. Feelings of belonging are challenged by racialization and notions of ”Finnishness”, invisible boundaries between ”us and them” (cf. Wernesjö 2014).

Making Finnish friends is harder than making friends with other immigrants. Unaccompanied minors, like other young immigrants, have the best opportunity to get to know Finnish youth in school and in leisure time activities, especially sports, and later at work. It is, however, quite difficult to create friendship relations to Finns. An official in the immigration administration pointed out that the Finnish school system does not create contacts between the URMs and Finnish youth, because they are usually 16 or 17 years old at arrival, too old to enter an ordinary school and make friends there.

> *I don't have many Finnish friends. It is easy to make friends with foreigners. If you are out somewhere, like at the bus station, you can spot a foreigner and it is easy to talk to that person, because we may have something in common. But with Finns it's more difficult. Even sitting next to a Finn on the bus, can't really say why. And now, even when I am with Finns in school, I have no Finnish friends. It's not because I don't want to make friends, but they don't easily trust other people and then I'm a bit shy, like they are. But I have many foreign friends, maybe it will change with time. I get along with everybody it it's like working in a group, but it's all in school, not that they would ask about my life or I about their. (W, 21)*

> *Friends, yes, Afghans, also Somalis, Kurds, Finns and other. It doesn't matter to me where they come from, the person is important ... it's quite natural, they know about my life, but I have my culture and they have theirs, but we always respect each other. That's why I have no difficulties. (M, 22)*

Many boys have found a Finnish girlfriend; it is easier for them to find a girlfriend than for girls to find a boyfriend. This is a shortcut into Finnish society, when they get acquainted with a Finnish family and relatives. Some of them have later married (Björklund 2014; Mikkonen 2013).

One of the highest priorities of the URMs is reunification with their family in Finland. With the legislative change in 2010 this became very difficult. Almost everyone of the interviewed had applied for family reunification, but only two had been successful. The social workers and caretakers described reunification as a difficult process in all stages. The minors suffer from being separated from their family, and have high hopes of getting at least one family member to Finland. In

worst cases this leads to psychological problems, especially when they have to give up their hopes.

It is a moment of joy for an URM to be reunited with his or her family. On the other hand, family reunification may not always be in the best interest of the child (Clark-Kazak 2012). There are children seeking asylum from abuse by parents in the country of origin, and reuniting the family would not be in the best interest of the child (Bossin & Demirdache 2012). Even when reunification is in the best interest of the child, new challenges arise and much support is needed. The interviewed who had been reunited with their family in Finland saw themselves as very lucky. The first time together had, however, been very stressful and demanding. Authority conflicts can also arise within the family, especially if the young person has been separated from his or her family and cultural environment for a long time. It may not be easy for the parents to accept being in a practically inferior situation in relation to their offspring.

> *The reunification process started in 2009 and my family arrived in Finland 2011, it took almost two years. I had an immense responsibility, I did not know how to arrange practical matters such as with the social insurance office and the bank or even independent shopping. I had a really hard time and cried a lot. Because my parents did not understand Finnish and do not understand how the Finnish system works, I had to go everywhere with them. The first year was the worst, I had to interrupt school for almost one year. (W, 20)*

The problem is that although the reunited family is entitled to support and services, there is no single administrative unit or organization with overarching responsibility. There is no representative/guardian to assist them, because the minor is not unaccompanied any more when the family is in Finland, it is largely up to social workers. Although all family members are entitled to an integration plan, much of the practical tasks and responsibilities are in practice put on the minor (Björklund 2014).

Education

5

School and education are central institutions in the integration process. Education is not only acquiring formal knowledge, but also learning Finnish culture, norms and values. School is also a place to meet peers and make friends.

5.1 Overcoming initial difficulties

Unaccompanied refugee minors are a heterogeneous group regarding e.g. gender, age ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic background and previous education. They come from countries where their schooling often has been of low standard, insufficient or disrupted. Many of them have missed many years of school because of displacement. Also psychosocial and mental health problems impair their school success (Helander & Mikkonen 2002; De Wal Pastoor 2014). Cultural differences pose considerable problems, as one teacher put it:

> *I think that the biggest problems with Somalis is that their school system is so bad. In general the learning capabilities of both younger and older Somalis are what they are. On top of that Finnish and Somali are very different languages. But above all, their primary school system which is basically Koran school is primitive, so their way of learning makes it very difficult to learn a new language. (Teacher)*

It is a paradox that although the URMs generally show high school motivation and are hard working, so many fail in their education. According to a study by Kilpi (2010) on education of children of immigrants in Finland most children of

immigrants had a higher probability of dropping out from continuation to upper secondary education than the majority and were more likely to continue to vocational school. They also had lower average grades than the majority. In the School health promotion study (Matikka et al. 2014) adolescents representing first-generation immigrants stood out from the other groups. They were more likely than the other groups to have no close friends, perceived their health to be poorer than other adolescents and were more often tired and reported health related symptoms more frequently. These pupils were less satisfied with the atmosphere at school than other groups, and were also more likely to experience difficulties in studying. They also felt that they received support less often than other pupils. These findings cannot, however, be directly applied to URMs, because these studies encompassed all types of pupils with immigrant background, and the unaccompanied minors are in a more disadvantaged situation, lacking support from their parents. URMs might be in an even more difficult situation.

Education is a mutual process. It is not only refugee students who have to adapt to the school requirements, but also the school to the students. De Wal Pastoor (2014) has described exclusionary practices in education, care and support in Norway. The needs of the young refugees are not always adequate dealt with in the Norwegian school system. The compulsory school programme that most of them attend is regarded as adult education, where the students' rights are different from regular compulsory school students. The shortcomings of the Finnish education system regarding unaccompanied refugee minors show many similarities.

The prerequisite for attending school in Finland is fluency in Finnish or Swedish. The URMs have Finnish classes already at the reception centre, but the motivation to learn the language may be lacking as long as they are in the asylum process. "I had little motivation to learn Finnish as long as I did not know if I can stay or had to leave the country", as one interviewee expressed it. After getting the residence permit, the minor can attend a language course or preparatory classes.

5.2 Educational paths

Immigrant children of compulsory school age may be offered instruction preparing them for basic education. The objective is to promote the students' Finnish/Swedish skills and support the pupils' balanced development and integration into Finnish society and to give them the necessary skills to enable them to attend comprehensive school. Studying is supported with the help of class room assistants, social workers and cultural interpreters. Learning difficulties is prevented through guidance counselling (Policies, practices... 2014a). Those who

have passed the age of compulsory education on arrival can study at a folk high school or on a study programme for adults at an upper secondary school. All those who have completed the basic education syllabus or who have otherwise acquired corresponding skills are eligible for general upper secondary education. The number of immigrants in upper secondary education has not proportionally kept up with increasing immigration. One of the main reasons for this is that upper secondary school requires good skills in Finnish or Swedish. In 2014, the Finnish National Board of Education adopted the National Core Curriculum for Preparatory Education for General Upper Secondary Education, which is aimed at immigrants and foreign language speakers. The objective is to provide them with linguistic and other capabilities required in upper secondary education (Osallisena Suomessa... 2013).

Vocational studies form an alternative to upper secondary education. Before vocational education, immigrants may participate in preparatory education and training. The duration ranges from six months to one year. The objective of this preparatory training is to improve the student's language skills, coping skills and other skills needed in vocational education and training (Immigrant education in Finland, undated).

It is difficult for young immigrants who have arrived in Finland after the age of 15 to learn the language well enough to be able to successfully complete basic education and continue to upper secondary school or vocational education. They are let off easier and not required to take the test in mother tongue intended for Finnish- or Swedish-speaking students, but can take the test entitled "Finnish or Swedish as a second language" (Immigrant education in Finland). It is generally not so difficult for the youngsters to learn to basic proficiency in a new language, but acquiring the academic language and discourse required in different subjects in school is quite another matter (Mattila & Björklund 2013).

Although the URMs are motivated and hard-working, it is more difficult for them to succeed with their education than for students who have gone through the normal educational path since pre-school in Finland. There are other challenges than learning the language. Especially those minors, who have received insufficient education in their former home country often have learning difficulties and lack study skills. They often have experiences from an educational system very different from the Finnish. If the education methods have been very authoritarian, it takes extra time to learn to study independently and take responsibility (Aikuisten maahanmuuttajien perusopetus 2014).

The educational path has many preparatory elements designed for immigrants. There are many transition points where the risk to drop out is considerable. This risk is biggest for those over compulsory school age, as they must both learn Finnish and complete the basic syllabus in a couple of years, while Finnish children have nine years of comprehensive education in their mother tongue. It

has been estimated that a young immigrant needs between five and seven years to acquire the necessary cognitive language skills for higher level studies. Basic communication skills are much easier to attain, even in less than a year. Insufficient skills in Finnish or Swedish form the biggest obstacle to secondary stage education and the most important reason for young immigrants dropping out according to research findings in Finland and Sweden (Osallisena Suomessa 2013; Backlund et al. 2012).

There is no educational entity for such immigrants with a low level of education which would combine initial basic education and integration training. An additional problem is that much of the education is in the late afternoon or evenings, leaving youngsters lots of idle time. As an interviewed professional described the situation:

> *These youngsters enter the Finnish school system at a transition point. They can't naturally get acquainted with Finns of the same age in school. When they are around 15, they can't go to a general school, these youngsters have no clear educational path. Part of them is offered integration training for immigrants, which is not the most suitable start for a 17 year old. My suggestion is to establish a "comprehensive school for adults", especially when considering how many of the immigrants are illiterate. They should have a school which they could attend for an extended period of time. Now they attend different courses (in different institutions) which is not a sustainable system. If they attend upper secondary school, which few do, they confront new problems. (Administration professional)*

Only part of the young persons are able to make rational choices along this meandering educational path. It is difficult to make choices with insufficient knowledge of the new language and educational system. The risk of wrong choices is big also because it is difficult for a young person to correctly evaluate if the own resources match the demands of the preferred education. URMs run the greatest risks, because they have no family to support them (Rantakokko 2013). In the words of a counsellor:

> *These youngsters over compulsory school age have a very fragmented educational path. One course here, another there, then something else, like 'oh you couldn't take that course, well take vocational training, oh you can't do that, well, try to think of something'. The younger they are when they come, the easier it is to follow the path. Comprehensive school, vocational or upper secondary school, then further on. (Counsellor)*

5.3 Building a future

The young persons are themselves well aware of the shortcomings of the system. Sometimes they end up in a profession they are unhappy with, or live in a kind of limbo not being able to qualify for the education they want.

> *There should be more education for immigrants, because many learn Finnish slower than others. Then when you have no schooling, can't enter vocational school, you can get stuck at home for 7–8 years. (Administration professional)*

It is common for the URMs in their upper teens to be in a hurry to get on with their lives, to get an education, a job and form a family. There are also gender differences, which were mentioned in the interviews. Many girls have lower expectations and look forward to getting married and have children rather than pursuing any educational or professional career. The expectations are often high, but unrealistic. Studying until you are close to 30 is not an option for many 17-year old who want to have a job and money and find a place in society before they are "too old". Many minors do not understand why they have to study for years and not get credit for their practical skills. A young person I interviewed felt frustrated because he had been a car mechanic in his father's garage for many years, but still he was required to get a formal training to work in this profession in Finland (cf. Rantakokko 2013).

Family and relatives left behind might contribute to the pressure of earning money as soon as possible. Backlund et al. (2014) found that the URMs are more family oriented and feel a bigger responsibility towards their family than other children. Thus URMs like other young immigrants tend to end up in certain professions and job sectors which do not require academic studies. The Finnish language is a major obstacle. It is easier to choose educational paths where there are other foreigners and where it is possible to get by with everyday Finnish. Other young refugees are the reference group and they influence the choices of the individual.

> *The question of age, they lack the patience to sit in class for many years. If they are say 20, they want a wife and money and are in debt for the journey here. Then when they hear how many years it takes to achieve their goals many throw in the towel, life is over at 30, they feel. It's understandable because they come from countries where people die when they are in their 50s. 30 is being in the evening of life. They are much more in a hurry to form a family than the Finns in their age. (Counsellor)*

> *There should be more opportunities in immigrant education. Not everybody wants to be a bus driver or practical nurse... There are many good students,*

who have been good students already in their home country, but they can't get forward because of problems with Finnish... In vocational training they do not have enough information, the teachers don't give them the attention they would need. They feel that they must make it on their own... I've heard this from many friends, although I haven't had that problem myself... If you want to go to vocational school, you study something you don't really like. You become a practical nurse just because it's easy and it's an immigrant job. (Counsellor)

It's quite basic and simple, machinery and metal for the boys and also construction work is popular. It's common for the girls to prefer the social sector, become nurses and such. Even though the school counsellor tells the girls that it might not be the best choice, they want to try anyway and then end up doing cleaning work. (Counsellor)

There are success stories though. Many former URMs had succeeded very well in their lives, been able to draw on their initial skills, gotten a formal exam to achieve the formal qualifications and gotten a good job partly because of their practical experience before and after coming to Finland. Many have graduated from upper secondary high school and some continued with academic studies in Finland or abroad. A young woman summarized the challenges:

It's all up to yourself. Nobody tells you how to get on with your life. If you have a mother, she can tell you to go to school and what to do, but if you have no one, you do what you feel. Then you can make wrong decisions and think that now when I'm free nobody can command you to do anything. There the counsellors can tell you what you did good and what you did wrong. They have like the role of parents, but many do not listen to what they say, they play the role (of being free) and do what they like. (W, 21)

The educational path is part of a larger acculturation process tightly connected to social and cultural factors. Because the youngsters have no parents present, they seek support from their social network, social workers, teachers, caretakers, guardians/representatives etc. Because they rarely have good Finnish friends, they must rely on authorities in their decisions, otherwise they can be led astray by their peers. Thus it is very important that they are offered support on an individual basis, which takes all sectors of their life into account. A problem is that there is no single person or team which is assigned the whole parental role, different persons are responsible for different sectors, and e.g. the representative is the legal guardian of the minor, but accommodation and daily care are provided by the group home.

Turning 18 years old

6

Some of those turning 18 might still be minors, if their age has been wrongly assessed by the authorities, which may make the situation worse. Psychological symptoms and syndromes are linked to the transition to adulthood. Also the transition to adulthood during the asylum procedure means that more proof and credibility is demanded from the asylum seeker (Unaccompanied and separated... 2014). Reaching majority means losing support, such as custodian/guardian and specially tailored social services. Some support is still offered (in Finland and Sweden for three more years), but independent living comes at a price. On the one hand it means freedom and independence, but on the other responsibility for one's own life, living alone and managing daily routines. Isolation and loneliness might become an issue, especially when moving away from institutional environment. Few of these youngsters have a family present to support them. The resolution of the Council of Europe Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons (Migrant Children: What rights at 18 (2011), adopted 2014) calls on the member states to establish a transition category, between the ages of 18 and 25, and take political measures geared to welfare assistance and education, access to information on relevant administrative procedures, extension of housing assistance, access to health care and ensure specific training for social workers. The objective is autonomy:

> *It goes without saying that the objective is to provide young migrants with best possible help in making the transition to adulthood so that they can become fully responsible for themselves and achieve a good level of autonomy.*

There is an abundance of research on unaccompanied refugee minors, but the research interest has mainly been focused on children under 18 years of age and

their vulnerability and coping (e.g. Carlson et al. 2012; O'Higgins 2012; Orgocka 2012). Considerably less research has focused on what happens when they turn 18 and lose the specific benefits and entitlements they had as refugee minors. The legal framework and practices in this transition to formal adulthood differ considerably in Europe. There is little practice guidance on this issue on the European and wider international and. Turning 18 may in some countries cause a change in the residence permit status and generally URMs lose their right to family reunification if the procedure is not completed by that age.

According to the Council of Europe Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons (2011):

> *Coming into adulthood also changes the whole context of immigration determination: unaccompanied minors once attaining adulthood can no longer benefit from procedural safeguards; they have no entitlement to family reunification; they are exposed to an increased risk of detention; and the safeguards regarding return cease to exist. In short, unless their residence permits are extended on individual compassionate or humanitarian grounds, the former unaccompanied minors automatically join the ranks of irregular migrants who are expected to return voluntarily to their countries of origin or risk forced return as an adult under the Return Directive.*

Some of those turning 18 might still be minors, if their age has been wrongly assessed by the authorities, which may make the situation worse considering their vulnerability. It has been shown, that psychological symptoms and syndromes are linked to the transition to adulthood. Also the transition to adulthood during the asylum procedure means that more proof and credibility is demanded from the asylum seeker (Unaccompanied and separated... 2014).

The 18th birthday brings many changes in the life of the unaccompanied minor. Reaching the age of majority means losing the representative and the right to family reunification. S/he must leave the family group home and live independently. Part of the older URMs are placed in supported housing directly after getting residence permit, depending on in what municipality they have been placed. For the latter group turning 18 is not so big a change as for the former. The situation is not easy although they are provided with support. An independence promotion plan is drawn up well in time before coming of age. The availability of after care and support is very important at this stage, as the new situation can be quite chaotic and many everyday tasks challenging. Everyday household must be managed from cooking meals to doing the laundry, and income and expenses must balance. The caretakers told of many problems which young people face in this stage of life. All youngsters moving away from home, not only immigrants,

face the same problems, but URMs cannot turn to their parents in times of difficulty. Caretakers:

> *It's only natural that young persons look forward to moving into their own home and become independent. Then after some time they start to think about how nice it would be if somebody waited with warm food when they come from school. Sometimes it happens that someone who has moved away from here (the family group home) visits us to meet friends, and one says that he wants to move away, and the other says that let's change places, you move to my place and I move back here. (Caretaker)*

> *They might seem to get along fine, have neat clothes at school and so, but when you visit them you may see really strange things. They should have a mother who would visit them every now and then to clean and do their laundry. (Counsellor)*

> *I think that they are strong and able. They leave here with a brave mind even if they might be terrified about paying bills and manage school and such. But they take one day at a time and usually everything goes well. (Counsellor)*

Experiences from Sweden, which in practice employs similar support measures as Finland for the URM coming of age reflect the same challenges that the youngsters face. The National Board of Health and Welfare evaluated the reception, care and arrangements of URMs in 2013 and found that many of those turning 18 experience the transition from a housing with 10–20 other young persons to living alone in an apartment quite overwhelming. They were happy for the freedom, but missed the support of staff and peers in the HVB-housing. The transition to adulthood can be facilitated by support, assistance and follow-up of a mobile team or similar actions and having a social network around the youngster. In Sweden the social workers draw up individual implementation plans for the support. These plans are quite detailed and list what the young persons need to learn and how to do it. It also contains information on which adult to contact in different situations (Policies, practices... 2014b; Backlund et al. 2014).

The counsellors and social workers I interviewed agreed that integration takes at least 10–20 years, even though the URMs learn independent living within a short period of time (Björklund 2014). There is very little research on the later lives of URMs. Most of the research has focused on the initial period in the new home country and on the best way to organize reception and after-care. Little attention has been paid to how their background, living without parents in a new culture in a vulnerable period of their lives, has affected their choices and life-trajectories (see Backlund et al. 2012).

Entering the labour market

7

It is good to live in Finland. But we foreigners have one problem. Work, it's difficult to find. I attend one course and study only four hours. When I wake up in the morning, there is nothing to do for a long time. I try to find work, but I haven't found anything. Everybody asks me do you have a profession? (M, 21)

After getting a residence permit, a person has a right to work if s/he has reached the age of 15 or will reach that age during the period of the validity of the permit. Everyone receiving international protection has the right to work (Aliens Act 78/3). Those who have completed compulsory schooling, usually at the age of 17, register at an Employment and Economic Development Office, where all support services such as information on job vacancies, workforce training, careers counselling, integration and language training are available to them (Policies, practices... 2014a).

It is, however, very difficult for minor immigrants to find work, as it also is for native youngsters. Basic skills in Finnish/Swedish is a must for any kind of job. Those URMs under 18 who work, usually do only temporary jobs for pocket money on the side of their studies, such as delivering morning papers or helping in a pizzeria (Björklund 2014).

Generally, the situation of immigrant youth on the labor market is difficult and the inactive share (not on the labor market or in education) of them has been much higher than for Finnish youth (Osallisena Suomessa 2013). The URMs are in the same situation as other youngsters with refugee background. Prejudice and discrimination are obstacles on the labor market. To compensate for this, they need good command of Finnish/Swedish and documented professional skills, persistence and also luck. A young woman revealed her resilience when telling about her hopes:

> *I hope to graduate soon, and my dream job is working as an accountant. I don't know if I will succeed in getting a job as accountant when I finally have vocational qualification in business and administration after one year and a half. Maybe I must continue to study at a university of applied sciences after that. Maybe I can work and study at the same time, because three-four years in school again is too much, and how would I finance it? It would be very hard, first three years here and then four years more, seven years. I can't make it that way. I look for work, and think about university studies then. (W, 21)*

Many of the URMs choose to look for a job instead of studying because the student allowance is lower than the unemployment benefit paid as integration assistance, which ends after three years. As one counsellor said:

> *The more successful they are, the less money they get. If they start studying at a vocational school or somewhere, the study allowance is half of what they get as unemployment benefit. It's not very motivating. Those who understand how the system works and understand that they have to get by with little money, they have the strength. But those who don't have this understanding and persistence and aspirations have hard to understand why they should go to vocational school and get 400 Euros a month when they get 700 for doing nothing. (Counsellor)*

A young man told about how the dilemma is accentuated by the expectations of the family in his home country:

> *It is difficult. The most important thing to me is that I must study, but my family needs money. I only have two choices, if I work at some kebab or pizzeria I can't study and can't find any job in the future. That's a dilemma, but when I study and my family needs something, I help. (M, 22)*

The factors separating those who came as URMs on the labour market from other immigrants of the same age are initial vulnerability and resilience, no family present and a period of life in institutional settings, and a pressure to succeed, for many the reason they were sent to seek asylum in the first place. Lowering the aspirations was a reality for most of the youngsters interviewed in the research project, but keeping up appearances was essential for all. In the words of a counsellor:

> *Nobody ever goes home or phones home and says "I have a difficult time in Europe. Life sucks, I can't make money and work is hard to come by". Everybody must say that life is a breeze and money keeps pouring in. Nobody can say (to the family) that it's not easy, it's hard, because then they have failed while others have succeeded. When they come here (to Finland) they think that all is fine, all goes well and all the doors are open. But it isn't like that at all. (Counsellor)*

Conclusion: Challenges and good practices

8

8.1 Challenges

In Finland the reception of unaccompanied minors is directed by the Ministry of Interior and the Finnish Immigration Service during the asylum process. After a residence permit has been issued the Ministry of Employment and the Economy and the Centres for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment (ELY-centres) take over the reception responsibility. In different stages of the process, reception of minors is regulated by the Act on the Reception of Persons Seeking International Protection, by the Act on the Promotion of immigrant Integration and the Child Welfare Act. The Reception Act is concerned with all children living in group homes, while the Integration Act is applied to children in family group homes (Ilman huoltajaa tulleiden... 2014; Policies, Practices... 2014a).

After the unaccompanied minor has received a residence permit, s/he is transferred to a family group home, supported or private housing. When assigning a municipality of dwelling for a minor, the possibilities to have contact with relatives and friends in Finland are considered, as well as available municipal services. Even if the principle is to keep the minor in the municipality of present residence, this is not always possible. The minor and his/her representative, the group home, the social worker of a municipality and the ELY-centre cooperate in finding the best solution for placement, accommodation and school. Minors living in group homes and family group homes need the municipalities' services, and the role of the municipalities is of central importance.

If there are no vacancies in the family group home close to the reception centre, the minor is placed in a family group home in another part of Finland or in supported accommodation. The family group homes are far from another, and the minors lose the social networks they have previously created in such cases (Figure 3).

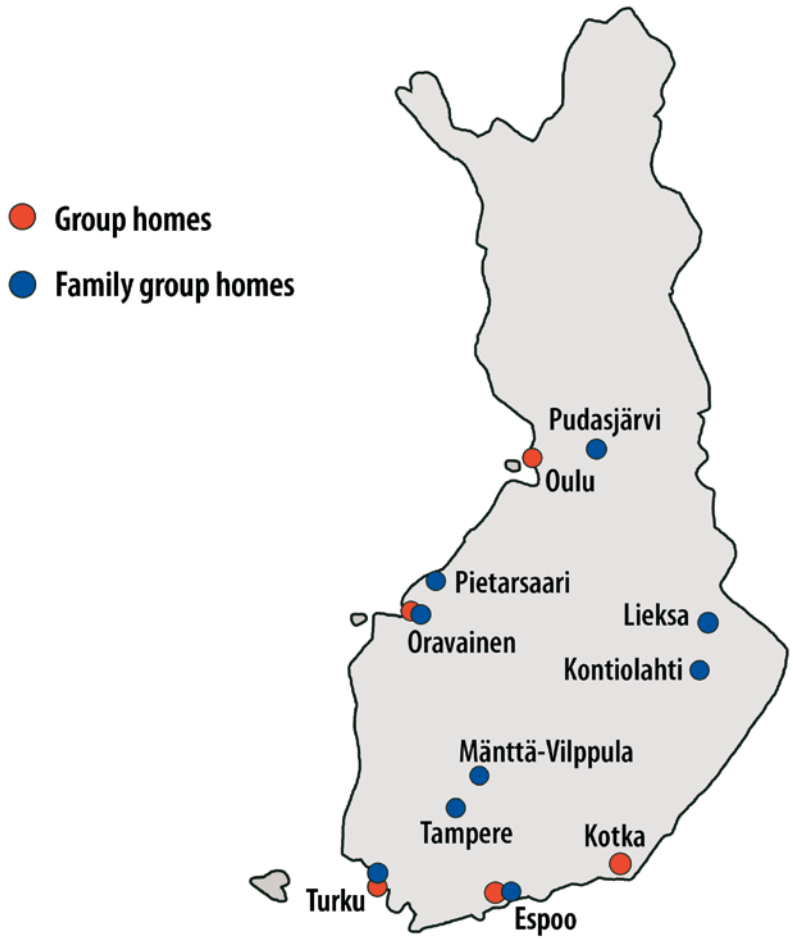

Figure 3. Group homes and family group homes for unaccompanied minors in Finland 23.6.2014 (Source: Ilman huoltajaa tulleiden... 2014).

Following the split legal administration the group homes and the family group homes are under the jurisdiction of two different organizations. The group homes and the reception units are the responsibility of the Finnish Immigration Service and the family group homes of the ELY -centres. The Immigration Service administers the group homes according to uniform principles, while the different ELY -centres have different practices in administering family group homes. Because of insufficient cooperation between these two organizations, administration and supervision do not support the reception process as it should. Also establishing new and closing old units is not planned in cooperation (Ilman huoltajaa tulleiden…2014).

Around 90 % of the unaccompanied minors get a residence permit and the asylum process may take 10 months. During this time the minors make friends

and establish social networks. They receive medical and welfare services, engage in leisure time activities and have a local representative. Moving far away disrupts all these contacts, a new representative must be appointed and the minor must make new friends and adjust to the situation. There are group homes and family group homes in Turku and Espoo, but the family group homes do not have the capacity to take all minors from the group homes in the same city. As alternative, the Federation of Special Welfare Organisations (EHJÄ ry) provides supported housing services for young immigrants in the Helsinki area and in Raisio close to Turku. The family group homes should be dimensioned according to the number of minors in the group home to minimize the need for minors to be placed in another part of the country. Another way to provide housing in the place of initial residence would be to arrange more family care.

The family group homes provide care for the minors until they are ready to move to independent housing, but after that, they are free to move wherever they choose, as are those who have been placed in independent housing directly after living in a group home. It has become a common trend in the Nordic countries that unaccompanied minors and adolescents choose to move to major cities, to Stockholm, Malmö and Göteborg in Sweden (Backlund et al. 2014), to Oslo in Norway (Stabell Wiggen 2014) and to the Helsinki area. They often end up without a home and live with relatives and friends, which does not promote integration. Often the youngster remains alone not receiving enough support and guidance (Ilman huoltajaa tulleiden… 2014). In Sweden new problems have surfaced among those recently arrived, such as drugs and criminality. Many of the URMs have lived on the streets in South Europe and have different experiences from those who arrived earlier and are in need of special support (Backlund et al. 2014).

Because of the split administration and shortcomings in cooperation between organizations, the task of the ALTTI work group appointed by the Ministry of Employment and the Economy (2014) was to clarify the official processes for unaccompanied minors. The group recommended that cooperation with municipalities must be stepped up, that monitoring family group homes requires more cooperation between the Regional State Administrative Agencies and the ELY-centres, and group and family group homes should be located close to each other.

Furthermore the working group considered that the good working practices of the units for minors should be nationally utilized by arranging regular work meetings and training events for the personnel of group and family group homes and training also should be arranged for the representatives of unaccompanied minors. Many unaccompanied children are in family care, and the working group recommended that attempts should be made to move from private accommodation to family care agreements once the residence permit has been obtained. This also requires training of families as family carers. When a young person from a family group home becomes independent, cooperation between the family group home

and the municipality is needed to provide the person with support and after care. The municipalities' integration programmes should consider that situation and arrange follow-up services (Ilman huoltajaa tulleiden… 2014).

Other shortcomings have been brought to attention. There is uneven supply of health care services for the URMs. They cannot always be provided with appropriate mental health care service despite their legal right to them. The availability of services varies in different parts of Finland. There is no organized system in which a professional with specialization in mental health would chart the psychological health of all unaccompanied minors. Usually they can access mental health care services only when they are in crisis (Policies, practices… 2014a).

The importance of providing a safe and secure reception was highlighted in a Norwegian report (Lidén et al. 2013). There were two kinds of residents in the reception centres, long term residents with temporary resident rights or no residence status, and a majority with shorter stays for two to five months, while waiting for a community placement. The health situation of the long term residents was especially critical. The low level of economic support implicated an inadequate nutritious diet and that medical treatment and medication was not prioritized. Also in Finnish reception centres there have been difficulties in providing asylum seeking minors with access to the child welfare activities offered by municipal social services (Policies, practices…2014a). Living in an uncertain situation when waiting for a decision on the asylum application has detrimental consequences for the minors, which increase with time.

There are shortcomings in the education provided for unaccompanied minors, especially for those above compulsory school age. A working group was appointed by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture in 2013 with the task of developing a new structure for the basic education. Unaccompanied minors were not singled out as a target group, but the recommendations apply to their situation as well. The group requiring special attention consists of those immigrants between 13 and 25 of age who have insufficient basic education. They have no clear education path and fall between basic education and integration training for immigrants. As earlier stated, there is no educational entity in Finland for immigrants with a low level of education which would combine initial basic education and integration training. The working group proposed establishing of a new structure for adult (17 and older) initial education combining initial basic education, preparatory instruction and teaching of reading and writing. The goal is that the students reach a level enabling them to attend basic education for adults and that they attain the Finnish/Swedish language basic skills (level A2.2). The maximum duration of integration support for independent studies would be prolonged from the present 24 months to 48 and that those who attend full-time basic education in an educational institution for adults would be eligible for study grant (Aikuisten maahanmuuttajien perusopetus 2014).

8.2 Good practices and recommendations

Unaccompanied refugee minors are not a homogenous group. They are of different ages and gender and come from many different countries and cultures. Their social and educational background vary. In the country of residence they are defined as children, minors, youngsters or adolescents and all are migrants. They are ”othered” and not seen as normal children and youth in everyday situations and contexts. Xenofobia, racism and social exclusion constitute obstacles for integrating and building a new life. This poses challenges for integration policies. Basically it is a question of reducing the otherness and providing the refugee minors with resources (most importantly a home, income, education and language proficiency) to minimize the disadvantage they have in the new country and make them feel ”togetherness” with society.

Institutions and professionals are geared to take care of the unaccompanied minors. The problem is, that the agency and aspirations of the minors are not sufficiently taken into account by the systems designed to pursue their best interest. As Chase (2013, 18) puts it:

> *Evidence suggests that rather than being negotiated, young peoples' futures are processed through such life planning frameworks, their 'best interests' largely determined by bureaucratic and paternalistic conveyor belts over which they have minimal control.*

The URMs are given opportunity to voice their own preferences in the reception system, but structural shortcomings and insufficient cooperation between authorities and organizations and limited resources often makes it difficult to take individual preferences into account. A problem in tailoring integration measures to respond to the need of the individual is, that it is common for unaccompanied minors to feel gratitude for being received and criticism is rarely voiced. The assumption of the professionals and care takers that they can direct the young persons towards one path or another risks to overestimate their authority and underestimate the agency of the youngsters. Instead they may draw on the support of their own networks when they pursuit their life plans (Chase 2013).

All Nordic countries have fairly well functioning reception systems based on the principle of the best interest of the child, but there are common problems; fragmented organizational structures with insufficient cooperation, problems with placing URMs in municipalities which often are unwilling to receive them, difficulties in providing adequate language training, education and health care, following up adolescents coming of age with supporting measures, minors disappearing during the asylum procedure etc.

As above outlined, there are many good practices already at work in all Nordic countries, but also some shortcomings which need to be addressed. The following recommendations address several administrational and organisational levels:

- The best interest of the child should be a primary concern, and should be the base of all practices. Also young persons approaching the age of maturity are children by definition, but they must also be given agency in decisions concerning them.
- There is no single authority responsible for the welfare of the unaccompanied minors in any of the Nordic countries. The administrative structure needs to be simplified and/or cooperation between administrative sectors improved. In Finland cooperation is needed between the ministries but also between the ELY-centres, TE-offices (Public employment and business services), municipalities and educational institutions. A permanent committee should be established to monitor and coordinate the welfare, support, education and integration of the URMs.
- The uneven supply of health care services, especially the access to mental and psychiatric care for the URMs must be remedied. The minors' access to these services should be equal in all parts of the country.
- Minors should not be moved several times between reception centres, family homes, group homes and supported housing in different parts of the country.
- Training of carers, teachers, representatives, social workers and other professionals working with URMs should be stepped up and monitored.
- Primary and secondary education need improving. In primary education the minors should receive sufficient preparatory education before being placed in an "ordinary" class and the size of heterogeneous classes should not exceed ten pupils. Integration in school should be supported with teachers' cooperation. Support persons knowing the immigrant child's mother tongue should be employed in bigger schools. The children's own mother tongue should be supported.
- Attention must be paid to those URMs beyond compulsory school age. They often finish comprehensive education with insufficient language skills and do not attain the same knowledge level as native minors.
- A new structure for adult initial education combining initial basic education, preparatory instruction and teaching of reading and writing is needed. Integration training must be better coordinated with school education.
- Support should be provided also after the age of 18. After care is generally available to the age of 21, but there should be possibilities to get support also after that. The transition points on the educational path are especially critical for minors and targeted individual support is important. Also the

transition from education to entering the labour market is critical, and different forms of publicly supported entry jobs providing gates to the open labour market should be available.

- Free time activities should be encouraged, because it is one of the best ways to establish contacts between the native population and the young immigrants. NGOs and clubs should be encouraged to organize different kinds of activities (sports, cultural activities, hobbies etc.) involving young immigrants. Targeting municipal support to such efforts would be a powerful incentive.
- Integration is a two-way process involving both immigrants and natives, and information to the majority population on a local level is important. Mentorship and international friend families have proven to be good practices.

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