VERSITA

Nordic Journal of Migration Research

Article • DOI: 10.2478/njmr-2013-0007 NJMR • 3(3) • 2013 • 162-170

"BETWIXT AND BETWEEN": *Hope and the meaning of school for asylum-seeking children in Sweden*

Abstract

This study explores the sense of possibility as perceived by asylum-seeking children in Sweden in relation to education. An ethnographic approach brought out children's own perspectives and motivations, and the hopes they pinned to attending school. It was found that the meaning of school related to children's need of structure, a sense of belonging and a learning environment. However, their hopefulness was conditioned by their uncertain status as asylum seekers, worrying about being deported. This legal and emotional vulnerability and the limited attention of schools to their predicament risked undermining the benefits of their right to education.

Keywords

Asylum-seeking • children • school • hope • liminality

Received 14 September 2012; Accepted 12 July 2013

Malin Svensson[1*], Marita Eastmond[1,2]

[1]Migration and Health Unit, Nordic School of Public Health, Gothenburg, Sweden

[2]Department of Social Anthropology, School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden

1 Introduction

School often figures favourably in European research on refugees as a supportive and health-promoting environment (e.g. Candappa & Igbinigie 2003; Hek 2005; Rutter 2006; Watters & Ingleby 2002). A report on refugee and asylum-seeking children in the UK, for instance, found that "being engaged in education despite being destitute provided them with a great deal of support and a sense of normality ..." and concluded that school allowed the children to maintain their aspirations, even under conditions of hunger, homelessness and the risk of abuse (Pinter 2012: 21). The terms vary considerably between European recipient countries; some guarantee the same rights as resident children, whereas others provide only differentiated or no access to education, depending on legal status (Nonchev & Tagarov 2012).

With regard to asylum-seeking children specifically, there is relatively little research that focuses on their rights to education (however, see e.g. Candappa 2000 for the UK; Vitus & Lidén 2010 for Scandinavia). This lack, at least in some countries such as Sweden and the UK (Pinson & Arnot 2010), may be related to the fact that their school statistics assign asylum-seeking children to the broad category of "newly arrived pupils"[1]; a category that includes children who already have permanent residence and, therefore, disregards important differences – not least in terms of legal status and entitlements. Existing research on asylum seekers, whether unaccompanied (e.g. John *et al.* 2002; Lundberg & Dahlquist 2012) or accompanied by their families (Lennartsson 2009; Löwén 2006), mention school as important for establishing social relations and a potential source of meaning but do not go deeper into what such meaning would entail. Taking our cue from this observation, we address school as a locus of possibilities as perceived by 14 accompanied asylum-seeking children in Sweden.[2] We examine how, during the highly conditional asylum seeking existence, the children interact with school and negotiate their position in relation to the possibilities there. While the hope of obtaining permanent residence was present in all these pupils, so were fears of deportation,[3] not least among the older children.

2 Theoretical framework

Theoretical inspiration for the study was sought in Ghassan Hage's work (2003) on migrants in Australia, especially his writings on the relationship between the innate human ability to feel hope (hopefulness) and society's role in distributing hope of a better future to its citizens (social hope). Hopefulness, in Hage's formulation, enables people to invest in social reality even when the odds appear extremely bleak and fear is present. It is "the ability to cope with what is beyond one's control and a belief in the possibility of a minimum sense of agency despite all" (Hage 2003: 24). Hopefulness is thus related to humans' need to construct a meaningful future, resembling Ernst Bloch's description of hope as being about the future as envisioned in the present (Bloch, cited in Hage 2003:10). Social hope, on the other hand, is related to society's allocation, never uniform or equal,

* E-mail: malin.svensson@liu.se

of welfare and other social opportunities for self-realisation. Thus, in Hage's analysis (2003), a person's *sense of possibility* is related to the ability to trust in society's provision of such opportunities. Such trust cannot be taken for granted by asylum seekers without being assured of a permanent residence status, although it does not prevent them from being hopeful. Crapanzano (2003) makes a distinction between hope and desire: hope relates to a positive stance of life in general, e.g. a belief that things in life will come to a good end. When its object is more specific, hope is more like desire, as in the case of desiring a permanent residence permit. Importantly, the fulfilment of desire, Crapanzano suggests, requires human agency (not necessarily one's own), while fulfilment of hope requires some other agency, e.g. chance, fate or a god (Crapanzano 2003). Children, as a rule, have little say in the assessment for asylum and are not always clear about with whom the decision lies. Nevertheless, both hope and desire are affected and shaped, we presume, by children's possibility to attend school. In Crapanzano's formulation: "… as individually lodged as we take them to be, both hope and desire have to be understood as precipitates of interaction or interlocution" (Crapanzano 2003: 6). Furthermore, we see hope and desire as anticipatory stances, and as closely related to that of social imagination (Appadurai 1996). We refer particularly to Appadurai's notion of global flows of images of other places and use it to refer to an individual's ability to imagine her/himself in the social world-to-be. Both hope and imagination are part of what motivates migrants and refugees to seek a future that may lead to a better life. In an increasingly interconnected world, people encounter and construct images of conditions and opportunities in other societies that influence their choice of a safer place for themselves and their children. For asylum-seeking pupils as well as for their parents, school and education represent an important route to such improvement and play a role in shaping the image of a good life and future (e.g. Eastmond 2010).

Children everywhere represent the future as agents for social reproduction and society's perpetuation. School, concerned with children's socialisation and education, is also strongly oriented towards the future, teaching pupils to aspire to goals and charting their progress through the grades. In this capacity, school as a social institution is very much a symbol for and mediator of what Hage refers to as social hope, distributed by society and a locus of investment for the future.

A third conceptual category, *liminality*, relates to the special terms on which children in this study exist and project themselves into a future in Swedish society. Liminality has to do with their conditional emplacement, as asylum seekers, and the ambiguity characteristic of that position. Originally a concept in anthropological studies of social transitions (Turner 1967), liminality refers to the "betwixt and between" period in a transition from one social position in the life course to another (e.g. from child to adult). The ordeals that young people go through in ritualised transitions, symbolically stripped of personal and social identity, can serve as a metaphor for children seeking asylum as they exist "betwixt and between" nation states: Separated from the country of origin and its protection, but not yet assured of full and secure incorporation into the country of asylum (e.g. Khosravi 2011). As Malkki (1995) points out, in the "national order of things", i.e. a world system of nation states, where each person needs to belong to and be protected by his/her state, asylum seekers are anomalies, legally and socially. In such an order, as Malkki puts it, refugees are "people out of place". As will be shown below, this ambiguity of tentative emplacement is reflected both in the policy and the institutional practice of education for asylum-seeking children in Sweden.

Thus, hope and imagination in a liminal existence form the conceptual frame for investigating the experiences of asylum-seeking pupils. More specifically, this article explores the following questions: What meanings do the children in this study ascribe to school in Sweden given the highly unpredictable outcome of their asylum case; what are the images and hopes they relate to school and education and in what ways do they invest in the social reality that school represents for them?

Below we review the relevant features of the educational system for asylum-seeking children in Sweden, outline the methodology used to examine the children's experiences of attending school, and, finally, present the findings in sections that reflect the themes that emerged from analysing the data.

3 Education for asylum-seeking children in Sweden

The idea of "normal life" for asylum-seeking children is a central feature of the Swedish reception policy as well as of the policy for their education – to provide conditions that are as similar as possible to those of resident children. This includes municipal housing,[4] rather than isolated reception centres, and the right to start school within 1 month of arrival. The children are exempt from compulsory school attendance, however, and cannot enter upper secondary school unless registered there before the age of 18 (Swedish Education Act 2010). The Swedish Migration Board informs local authorities and schools about new asylum-seeking pupils. An investigation by the Swedish National Agency for Education (henceforth SNAE, 2008a) showed that local authorities do not routinely summon these children to school and unrecorded non-attendance is likely to be substantial. Similar findings have been reported from the UK (e.g. Dennis 2002).

As to educational policy, there are no directives for newly arrived pupils apart from what is subsumed under the Education Act (2010). However, the SNAE has provided a set of General Recommendations for local authorities and schools to guarantee these children their educational rights, in particular the right to Swedish as a second language (henceforth SSL) and mother tongue tuition (SNAE 2008b). In practice, schools have developed different local models to fulfill the recommendations and provide solutions for newly arrived pupils. For instance, the pupil may join a Swedish mainstream class (henceforth MC), with separate instruction in SSL and/or in-class study guidance in the pupil's mother tongue, for education utilisation. Alternatively, the pupil may join an introductory class for non-Swedish-speaking children (henceforth IC[5]) with the main goal to provide sufficient command of Swedish for subsequent transfer to an MC. Regarding mother tongue tuition, not all schools provide it and those that do often arrange it outside the ordinary timetable (Swedish Schools Inspectorate 2012: 13). The duration of IC participation is not regulated (SNAE 2008b: 13); which gives IC teachers great discretion – within the resource constraints – in deciding when to transfer a pupil to an MC (cf. Ekermo, cited in Bunar 2010: 57). Also, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2009: 6, 7) has noted that pupils in ICs and those in MCs with separate SSL are often disconnected, geographically and socially, from the main school activities. The Inspectorate concluded that too long a stay in an IC holds pupils back and prevents them from developing skills in other subjects (2012: 11); moreover, study guidance is often provided in an *ad hoc* manner (Swedish Schools Inspectorate 2012: 13), as also found in the UK (Rutter 2006: 151).

For the schools, one problem is financing for asylum-seeking pupils; the allocation via the Migration Board is lower than for resident

pupils. To cut back on costs, in some places school days are shortened to exclude lunch and schools offer fewer subjects (Swedish Schools Inspectorate 2013a, 2013b). These examples of school practices demonstrate that the idea of "normality" promoted by the Swedish policy is difficult to implement in practice. Furthermore, in a study on the Swedish asylum reception system, Appelqvist (2006: 37) reports insufficient understanding among school staff of the asylum process and of its consequences for the pupils concerned. While education is expected to help children integrate into Swedish society, asylum-seeking children are at the same time supposed to be mentally prepared for repatriation, an ambiguity noted by Appelqvist (2006: 9) and Brekke (2004: 27). Such preparation, however, is outside of the responsibility of the education system.

4 Methods

Understanding asylum-seeking children's experiences at school was based on their reports and our observations; data from interviews with teachers and parents were also included where relevant.

The study draws on data from ethnographic fieldwork in 2007–2009 during the asylum process of initially 15 children (18 were asked to participate, 3 declined), including five pairs of siblings. The criteria for recruitment were that children were asylum seekers, accompanied by their families and of school age. We were given access to the information meetings held by the Swedish Migration Board for asylum-seeking families to introduce ourselves and our research. Thirteen children were recruited through these meetings, and an additional two from an NGO. Both parental and child consent were obtained and continuously confirmed throughout the research process.

One child ended our contact shortly after the study began and was later deported. Of the remaining 14, 6 were aged 6–11, 8 were 12–16, with an equal gender division. They arrived as asylum seekers between 2006 and 2008 from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. Except for the siblings, most of the children did not know each other. At the end of our fieldwork, 8 of the 14 children had been granted permanent residence, 3 were waiting for appeal decision, 1 was waiting for the first decision and 2 had been rejected and deported.

With children aged between 6 and 16, a variety of data collection techniques was required to encourage individual expression. We used semi-structured interviews – at times more informal and unstructured in character, as well as drawings and photography. In addition, participative observations were made in the children's homes, during leisure activities, at school and during "walk-alongs" (Svensson 2010). Some of the interviews were conducted during walk-alongs from school to home. The techniques were optional and useful in getting to know one another as well as in building trust. Each respondent was provided with a disposable camera as well as a sketch-block and pens.

The data collection was carried out by Malin Svensson, but both authors took an active part in the analysis. Between 4 and 15 meetings were conducted with each child, in most cases until the first decision was received, usually in their homes and a few times in public places such as a church, NGOs premises or at school. They were housed in flats in towns or smaller communities. The empirical material also included a full one-day observation as part of visits made to each child's school: Eight junior compulsory schools (grades 1–6), one senior compulsory school (grades 7–9) and one comprehensive upper secondary school. A majority of these schools offered both the IC and the MC models; three did not offer IC education and placed asylum-seeking pupils directly in an MC. In our study, nine children were placed in ICs and five in MCs.

Interviews with the children were conducted using authorised interpreters, experienced in working with children; with a few exceptions, the same interpreter was used consistently for each family. With time, as the children's Swedish language skills improved, they declined having an interpreter. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, observations were documented in field notes and the creative material (drawings and photographs) was used to encourage free expression, stimulate a dialogue and was sometimes compared with other data to obtain more depth. Analysis was ongoing throughout the research process, including several readings of the material, as well as interpretation of the results at different stages until salient themes were identified.

Research with children living under great uncertainty poses challenges not only to the researcher (Svensson, Ekblad & Ascher 2009) but also to the children. Even so, the majority followed through and most of them seemed to benefit from the interest in their everyday lives. Some parents expressed their wish that participation would ameliorate the conditions of future asylum-seeking families. Furthermore, some children and parents seemed to hope that participation would favour their asylum case despite our repeated reminders that we could not influence the outcome. Hence, it was essential but not always easy to maintain a balance between closeness and distance, and to avoid creating unrealistic expectations. Another research challenge concerned interpretation; relying on interpreters meant having to return several times to important themes to validate our understanding, by approaching it from a different angle. An ethical issue concerned the representation of the children's voices. Some of them expressed a willingness to be recognised by using their own names; however, when the need to protect their anonymity had been explained, they agreed to choose the pseudonyms used in this article (cf. Svensson 2010).

5 Findings

The themes that emerged from the data collection indicate a number of areas in which the children invested their efforts: structure and predictability, a learning environment, peer relations and material belongings. The meanings ascribed to school tended to differ with the child's age. The younger children seemed to be mainly concerned with playing "here and now" with arts-and-crafts material, the toys in the school yard and peers, and less with educational issues, demonstrating a more positive image of school and the teachers' role. The older children reflected more critically on their education and their own position and expressed a more nuanced picture of their school experiences. This included their struggling for interaction with Swedish peers, as well as more abstract reflections about their future. The older children were also more aware of their conditional status and reflected on whether there was any point in investing in a future in Sweden without certainty regarding being granted a residence permit. As Romina from Iran (aged 12) put it:

> … if I can stay in this country I'll have a very good future. But if I have to go back [to Iran], then everything is black.[6]

The photographs the children took in their photo assignment illustrate the importance of beginning school in Sweden. Most of them, especially the younger ones, had taken pictures of school,

outside as well as inside the building, sometimes including peers and teachers; some also documented their way to school. Sometimes the child was present in the photo, often together with the others. Benyamin (8) from Afghanistan shows his cousin's school building and himself lined up with her classmates in a colourful classroom. In the initial phase of the asylum process, many articulated a strong enthusiasm about school and their right to attend. Romina (12), 2 months after her arrival, compared Swedish school with her Iranian one and gave her first impressions of Swedish society:

> … everyone here [in Sweden] … and who has come here has got an awfully good future; lives awfully well …. So I have absolutely no doubt that even my future will be awfully good.

5.1 Structure and predictability

Reachard (6) from Lebanon attended an IC with nine pupils. Every morning the teacher shook hands with each pupil and greeted "Good morning". She then wrote the daily schedule on the board, marking the time and the activities with a red pen and breaks with a green. On the day of our visit, the teacher was absent and the assistant forgot to mark breaks in green; the pupils reacted immediately. One of them ran to the whiteboard and told her to change colours. When she also wrote the words "hour" and "end" in that order, there was an outcry and a girl went to the whiteboard and told her to change to "end" and "hour".

IC teachers in this study bore witness to such reactions among refugee pupils when details that were significant for them were forgotten or changed; therefore, most of them began each morning with including the pupils in a review of the daily schedule. It allowed few spontaneous changes as this would undermine predictability and teachers pointed out that if modifications were made, some of the children would show feelings of insecurity. Also, pupils in the heterogeneous ICs seemed concerned with categorising their classmates; what countries they came from as well as their mother tongue and religion – perhaps as a way to orientate oneself in the social structure of the class.

For most of the children in this study, the scheduling character of school seemed to counteract the lack of predictability in their lives. For example, the majority reported an accurate memorising of the timetable and kept track of which teachers would be present on a particular day. Many children checked their school bag before going to bed or in the morning, some calculated their arrival to school so they had time to play with peers. Most of them, especially the younger children, spoke cordially about their teachers.

During the walk-alongs, we found that the daily routines were significant for some of the children, e.g. the route to school as well as the time before and after school. Romina's (12) comments on her drawing of her path to school illustrates how she and her mother say hello to the same woman every morning, the school building is colourful and the sun is shining. Two brothers from Iraq, Asmar (12) and Polat (11), also walked to school, often accompanied by schoolmates, and expressed joy at being able to walk on their own; they had previously lived further away from school and had to use the school transport. The link between school and leisure activities was especially apparent during the walk-alongs with Reachard (6) and with Zack (6) from Iran, who hung around their favourite swings in the school yard before slowly moving on. The continuum of play came to a clear end, and Reachard, wanting it to last a little longer, rolled a snowball all the way home from school.

Living within walking distance of school increased the children's perceived range of possibilities and sense of agency, such as making friends, playing, doing homework with peers. Some of the other children lived far from school and their dependence on school transports prevented them from interacting spontaneously with peers. The importance of structure is also evident in the children's longing for school during holidays, often perceived as lonesome and boring. Sara (16) from Palestine described what being back in school after the holidays felt like:

> It was really great because during the holidays I longed so much for school. It is something I have got used to.

She even cancelled a medical appointment so as not to miss school the first day after the break.

One of the key elements for good school performance and for making friends is – according to these children – to master the language of the majority culture. School plays an exceptional role in furthering such skills.

5.2 School as a learning environment

Education is indeed an area related to hope for a better life in the future. Both the children in this study and their parents value education; they do so in different ways depending on class and educational background. Our results indicate that some children's investment in education stems from their parents' ambitions already before becoming refugees: For example, some parents taught their children at home when school attendance was prevented by conflicts, and some mothers had never themselves had the right to attend school. Especially the older children and those with few opportunities to go to school in their country of origin placed particular value on education. Sebastian (13), for instance, who had spent just 2 years in school in Afghanistan before being recruited for child labour, perceived educational opportunities as a chance to make a life:

> Who doesn't want to go on studying and learning more. When you have the chance, why not. You should be able to read and then examine what possibility or ability one has to continue. Then do well and try to forget the hard life one had and leave it behind you.

Often, such imagining among the children was expressed in terms of a particular profession.

The children in our study placed much effort in acquiring Swedish language skills, aware of it being a prerequisite for advancing into an MC and to comprehend other subjects. All of them expressed the desire to learn Swedish; seeing it as necessary to do well at school and to navigate in Swedish society.

Although they strove to master Swedish, some pupils worried that they did so at the expense of other subjects. Romina (12), in an MC, where most children spoke Swedish well, explained her concern that her focus on Swedish made her forget what she had already learnt in Iran:

> I've got to learn Swedish, which is really good, I force myself and I really try. But then came English, mother-tongue tuition and then all the other subjects. So I've become much worse at maths … sometimes I forget everything.

Other pupils also missed having more of other subjects such as maths, reading or arts and crafts, but the provision of study guidance in their mother tongue required for these subjects was very *ad hoc*. Especially the older children seemed to negotiate investment in efforts until legal status was assured. For instance, Sara (16) explained her reluctance to learn Swedish before having permanent residence. One week after being granted refugee status, Sara (16) said:

> [Now I feel that] if I am to work, much harder and learn the language very quickly, and if I go in for it even more, wow, I have a chance of going to university.

For others, waiting took its toll. With a more drawn-out and negative process, a few of the older pupils withdrew and showed symptoms of distress. They seemed to lose their motivation and their school performance declined. Teachers confirmed that these pupils no longer seemed to be making any progress. While the channels for agency appeared to be blocked and making efforts seemed increasingly pointless, hope – "the existential and affective counterpart of agency" (Lindquist 2006: 4) was more tenacious: School remained significant as a breathing space and could at times continue attracting their interest even when they were doing less well.

On the whole our data indicate that, irrespective of age, increased language skills enhanced children's self-confidence, and while learning Swedish was important for educational progress, it was as important for making friends and gaining a sense of belonging.

5.3 School as a social environment

The children in this study who started school in an MC interacted with Swedish peers more frequently and at an earlier stage than those in an IC. Especially small close-knit communities seemed to facilitate a sense of inclusion. Benyamin (8), for instance, was the only asylum-seeking pupil at his school and as such received positive attention from staff and peers. His teacher described him as a brave boy, who came to school all alone the first day; when everyone had introduced themselves to him, he did the same though he knew hardly any Swedish. During the first lesson he hardly talked at all, answered only when addressed but did what he could, e.g. held up his hand to choose a song during singsong. Sometimes, he toughened up to compete with the other boys, e.g. by arm-wrestling or other physical contact when words failed him. Such efforts under the right circumstances, as in Benyamin's case, could lead to friendships but did not result in social relationships for everyone. The other MC pupils in the study found making friends a challenge. Some of them were children in larger communities faced with prevailing notions about immigrants. Romina (12) appreciated that some of the Swedish girls tried to help her with the language. They later betrayed her confidence and teased her for not speaking proper Swedish. This was evident during our visit to her school: Their conversation and body language insinuated that Romina did not belong to their class. Later, she became close friends with another new girl in the class, originally from a country near her own. They shared thoughts and feelings during breaks, such as the desire to have a boyfriend, as well as future oriented hopes, such as what to become professionally. She had not told anyone in school that she was an asylum seeker and her teacher noted that she did not trust any adult at school – although Romina herself regarded her teacher as someone to turn to, for instance if she felt unwell.

In our observation of an IC class, we noted strong solidarity among the pupils, especially when attacked from the MC pupils. When one of Reachard's (6) classmates was hit by a snowball thrown by an MC pupil, his whole class reacted protectively and went together to inform their teacher. However, the internal solidarity among pupils with a refugee background, both in IC and MC, could be vulnerable to the competition for permanent residence that inevitably exists between asylum-seeking pupils. Sherbel's (12) feelings were hurt when he told his MC classmates, who were former asylum seekers, that his family's asylum application had been rejected. They responded by laughing at him.

Rejections affected the children's sense of possibility and well-being, reminding them of what they dreaded the most. Sebastian's (13) mother declared that being in a group with asylum seekers could be very trying for a young person:

> … there are youngsters around him in the same situation, many can be turned down. On those days he is very, very uneasy. He comes home and tells us with a lot of concern and anxiety and is extremely irritated.

Sebastian became quieter during the course of the study; his worries were manifested in his body language, e.g. his bowed head and withdrawal from dialogue. Though visibly sad and anxious, he decided to change schools and applied to the headmaster of the school in his neighbourhood where they only had MCs. He informed his teacher and headmaster and got their permission to change. He was then much more satisfied, being able to make Swedish friends in his own neighbourhood, do homework with peers and create a social life for himself.

Most of the IC teachers in this study appeared to be acquainted with the refugee experiences of their asylum-seeking pupils, whereas the MC teachers seemed less aware. However, all teachers seemed to have limited knowledge of the asylum process, e.g. the procedure for seeking asylum, the low level of the family daily allowance, the overcrowded housing conditions or which pupils were awaiting an asylum decision. They also refrained from sorting newly arrived pupils according to legal status, choosing to work as if they were all going to stay in Sweden (cf. similar findings in the UK by Pinson, Arnot & Candappa 2010: 210). Therefore, the everyday activities in class seldom concerned the asylum seekers' situation, except when a pupil received his/her asylum decision. When asylum was granted a pupil, it raised the expectations of the other asylum seekers in the class. Maria (12), for instance, was happy for her classmate who obtained a residence permit and hoped that she would also be as fortunate.

Pupils and teachers in this study, both within and outside an IC, sometimes depicted the IC as a form of exclusion or alienation from the school community. Some teachers indicated that this may be due to their physical placement at the margin of the mainstream school and their limited curriculum. Our data suggest that one of the strongest reasons for children to leave an IC, even though they might be emotionally attached to peers and teachers there, was to escape the social marginalisation of an "IC pupil". Looking forward to the possibilities that qualification for an MC represented, such as having Swedish peers, feelings of competence and expectations of belonging to "normality", was part of the asylum-seeking children's imagining.

The asylum-seeking children's silence about negative experiences of school or friends may also reflect their positive anticipation of school at this early stage, i.e. a feeling of relief on

arrival, having left difficult situation. Loneliness was a sensitive issue for these children, sometimes connoted with distress. Filiz (13) was reluctant to admit her lack of friends despite her long time in Sweden and described her social activities after school:

> We mostly meet in school. Some go to the cinema and I sometimes go with them. Sometimes we go into town in the evenings and buy clothes.

Filiz's mother, like other parents who sometimes gave a different picture, confirmed that this may be more wishful thinking than reality. Many of the other children's relations with peers had seldom gone beyond school situations, such as going with somebody to their house, or inviting each other. Also, many of the children lived in poverty and felt that their material possibilities were not as good as they had imagined them to be.

5.4 Owning something: material belongings

Material things were part of the children's emotional investments in social relationships and wish for social acceptance. The meaning of owning something like a bicycle or a mobile phone could be the ability to connect socially with peers, or to avoid loneliness. Farrah (7), attending an IC, was frank about her unwanted loneliness and her photographs illustrated her isolated life in a two-room apartment with her parents and two siblings, far away from school. She quietly explained that for her, it would be easier to make friends if she had a mobile phone. Not owning something was also a marker of difference easily producing a sense of shame. Asylum-seeking pupils made material comparisons with Swedish peers in an MC more frequently than did asylum-seeking pupils among themselves in an IC. Sherbel (12), waiting for an appeal to be decided, borrowed his Swedish classmates' games during breaks and lied to them for fear of being laughed at:

> I say that my mummy *does have* money but that I'm not allowed to buy [computer games]. But we *haven't* got money.

As a borrower, he felt inferior to his Swedish classmates, while his relation with them also generated hope; accessing their possessions and company during breaks helped him imagine that someday he too would be able to live safely in Sweden, own things he desired and be socially accepted. The emotional strain was sometimes too much and he shouted at classmates, he said, but regretted it afterwards.

Other children in this study were more silent about such feelings and entrusted their wishes for material things only to a few persons, like their parents – or kept them secret. Most of the parents faced a dilemma in negotiating their children's desires. Filiz's (13) mother responded by pointing to the future:

> I want to be able to give my daughter what she needs. Sometimes she wants things and I can't afford them. So I tell her that 'when we get permanent residence you shall have these things'.

For some, the lack of material things in a situation of restrictive poverty became an obsession, at the same time as they had to control their wants. Sherbel (12) felt responsible for his younger brother Reachard (6) and scolded him for asking the researchers for drawing-paper and pens:

> Mummy will be angry. I can fetch from school because mummy has said 'you're not to ask anyone for anything'.

Sherbel reminded his brother of their parents' financial situation and their fear of the children getting used to asking other people for things the family couldn't afford. Maria (12) also often heard her parents talk about their financial situation. She understood but also felt frustrated because she needed winter clothes which her parents could not afford. Financial poverty among asylum-seeking children is common[7] and often connoted with shame (e.g. Pinter 2012; Björnberg 2010). For some, however, poverty seemed to give rise to creative strategies to deal with it, such as borrowing from others or concealing their disadvantage. Others withdrew from peers out of school, or silently tried to accept their situation as temporary.

6 Concluding discussion

This article points to the importance of school in providing asylum-seeking children with a sense of possibility of a better life in Sweden. From their narratives and our observations, it is clear that the children invested much of their time and energy in school; most of them actively responded to the opportunities offered by the Swedish educational system. This provision of opportunities for education constitutes social hope, in Hage's terminology, in which Sweden, as receiving society, through its policy of "normal life", entitles asylum seekers to the same forms of education as newly arrived children with permanent residence status.

Without exception, the children in our study attached great importance to being part of a school class. School served as a guide in the process of learning how to become an accepted friend, being a pupil or even a resident in Swedish society. Their dedication to learning Swedish and mastering the language sufficiently to be moved up to a mainstream "Swedish" class, as well as to gaining friendships with peers permanently resident and fluent in Swedish, became important markers of achievement, attesting to the children's desire to become part of life in the new society. Even so, older pupils worried about falling behind in the other subjects; in terms of learning, Swedish school seemed less demanding than previous school experiences. Nevertheless, all seemed to thrive in a socially open environment, and trust developed over time with teachers and peers. Such trust promoted agency and was the means through which the majority struggled on, navigating an increasingly familiar territory and striving to consolidate the temporary space allotted to them.

In offering much-needed structure and stability, as well as a breathing space, school was clearly a source of well-being for the children. These findings resonate with the study of a Dutch programme to support refugee and asylum-seeking children, concluding that school has "…healing possibilities because it provides attention, structure and […] can serve as a bridge to the new society and the future" (Watters & Ingleby 2002: 44). This idea of school as a bridge to a new life in Sweden was embraced not only by many schools but also by the children themselves in their strivings to do well. However, as our study makes clear, the bridge metaphor is relevant only to those fortunate enough to obtain a permanent resident status. Bridges built with so much care and effort may well be erased from one day to the next. The sudden disappearance of a classmate acted as a reminder of the reality of failure and deportation and affected the hope and well-being of the others. Periods of vigorous efforts by the authorities to speed up returns of rejected asylum seekers were thus

likely to heighten both fear and rivalry between asylum seekers and further underscoring their conditional presence at school.

Thus, there were two parallel processes at work for these children in their liminal position, pointing in opposite directions: one nurtured hope and confidence in a steady mastering of a new language and social acceptance as member of a class and another mercilessly undermined it by reminders of the risk of rejection and return. The conflict between the two became increasingly acute over time, especially for some of the older children. Even so, against all odds, it seemed, some continued insisting on the importance of school as a link to the future. Faced with the threat of removal, they maintained hope and "the trusting expectation that tomorrow has something to offer" (Lindquist 2006: 6). Sebastian (13), waiting for a decision on his appeal, is a good example of the tenacity of hope:

> I manage because I think of the future. That we can have a better future. [School is meaningful] because one learns the language in school and one isn't alone, and one gets to know the society.

The conflicting projections into the future with which the children had to battle reflect the structural realities of their position. The chances for a better life for this category of children are in very real terms shaped by the relations of power in which they are involved: Sweden's restrictive asylum practice; the poverty of many asylum seekers due to minimal allowances and educational programmes that do not always address their needs. Social hope, formulated in the Swedish policy of "normal life", is in fact highly tentative and its realisation relies on the applicant being granted permanent residence. This policy, on the one hand, and the restrictive asylum determination on the other, posit a tension well known from other areas of refugee reception in Northern Europe, sometimes summed up as that between "care" and "control" (Eastmond 2011; Giner 2007).

A similar tension is evident in the polarisation of images of refugees in popular discourse as either victims, or otherwise "deserving" or as "bogus" claimants. The ambiguity characterising reception is aptly captured by Derrida's concept of *hostipitality,* signifying simultaneous hospitality and hostility (Derrida, cited in Khosravi 2011: 26). This structural inconsistency and its manifestations in social discourse form the context in which pupils are to pursue (and schools to provide) an education that can sustain their hopes for a better future.

This article throws light on a liminal category of children, who otherwise tend to be made invisible in the broader definition of "newly arrived pupils" in Swedish schools. It highlights their special predicament of "uncertain normality" – as pupils without an ensured right to settle and become members of society. Undocumented children – another category without permanent residence – have recently also gained the right to education in Sweden (Swedish Schools Inspectorate 2013b). Whether the sojourn in Swedish schools is beneficial to those who fail to secure permission to stay and if so, in what ways, is largely unknown, as the research on those returned is almost non-existent (cf. Rutter 2006: 48). The solution is not to deny children without permanent residence the possibility of attending school, but to address their particular predicament and attendant uncertainty. In the light of our findings, the real challenge for the receiving state and its educational system is greater recognition of the needs of this category of children. While drawing on the undeniable strengths of the Swedish school system, this could also entail providing them with more substantial education, social support for personal growth and a sense of possibility that may serve them well, irrespective of where they end up building their future.

Malin Svensson is a PhD student at the Nordic School of Public Health, Sweden. Her research interests are everyday life perspectives of asylum-seeking children, the Swedish reception system and ethnographic research methods. She is the author of 'Making Meaningful Space for Oneself: Photo-based dialogue with siblings of refugee children with severe withdrawal symptoms', *Children's Geographies,* Vol. 7, No. 2 (2009, with Solvig Ekblad & Henry Ascher) and of 'Barns vardagsliv under asylprocessen – en etnografisk studie', in *Mellan det förflutna och framtiden. Asylsökande barns välfärd, hälsa och välbefinnande,* edited by H.E. Anderson *et al*. (Kapitel 2010).

Marita Eastmond is a professor of Public Health at the Nordic School of Public Health and Professor of Social Anthropology at School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Her research focus is forced displacement and exile, the politics of asylum, the medicalisation of refugees' problems and narratives as lived experience. She is the author of *The Dilemmas of Exile* (1989/1997) and co-editor of *Globala Familjer: Transnationella Nätverk och Släktskap* (2007).

Acknowledgements

Funding has been provided by European Refugee Fund and Gothenburg Research on Asylum-seeking Children in Europe, Clas Groschinsky Foundation and Queen Silvia Jubilee Foundation.

Notes

1. The term refers to pupils arriving in Sweden at school age, i.e. 6–18, and who do not have basic command of the Swedish language (Swedish National Agency for Education 2008b: 6-7).
2. In 2009, by the end of our fieldwork, Swedish local school authorities registered 2,892 asylum-seeking pupils (Swedish National Agency for Education 2012).
3. In 2009, the number of accompanied asylum-seeking children who arrived in Sweden was 6,888; rejection rate was 61% and rising (Swedish Migration Board, Statistics Bureau 2011).
4. Housing is privately arranged or arranged by the Swedish Migration Board. In either case, the local authority is responsible for the child's education. In addition to a small daily allowance, health and dental care is free of charge as for permanently resident children (Swedish Migration Board 2012).
5. The concept of Introductory Class for newly arrived pupils is absent in Swedish Educational Legislation (SNAE 2008b: 4).
6. The original quotes are translated from Swedish to English. Words in square brackets come from earlier statements and are included here to clarify the quotation.
7. Asylum-seeking families are entitled to half the amount of social welfare that permanent residents receive (Williams 2012).

References

Appadurai, A 1996, *Modernity at large*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

Appelqvist, M 2006, *Mottagningens integration? Flyktingintroduktion som ett organisatoriskt fält [From reception to integration?: refugee introduction as an organisational field]*, IMER, Malmö University.

Björnberg, U 2010, 'Socialt kapital, tillit och resiliens hos asylsökande barn och föräldrar', in *Mellan det förflutna och framtiden: asylsökande barns välfärd, hälsa och välbefinnande*, eds H E Andersson, H Ascher, U Björnberg & M Eastmond, Centre for European Research at University of Gothenburg (CERGU), pp. 111–139.

Brekke, J-P 2004, *The struggle for control. The impact of national control policies on the arrival of asylum-seekers to Scandinavia 1999-2004*, Institute for Social Research, Oslo.

Bunar, N 2010, *Nyanlända och lärande: en forskningsöversikt om nyanlända elever i den svenska skolan,* Swedish Research Council 6:2010, Stockholm.

Candappa, M 2000, 'The right to education and an adequate standard of living: Refugee children in the UK', *International Journal of Children's Rights*, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 261–270.

Candappa, M & Igbinigie, I 2003, 'Everyday worlds of young refugees in London', *Feminist Review*, vol. 73, pp. 54-65. DOI: 10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400074.

Crapanzano, V 2003, 'Reflections on hope as a category of social and psychological analysis', *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 3–32, DOI: 10.1525/can.2003.18.1.3.

Dennis, J 2002, *A case for change. How refugee children in England are missing out*, The Children's Society, Refugee Council and Save the Children.

Eastmond, M 2010, 'Gäster i välfärden? Föräldraskap i asylprocessen', in *Mellan det förflutna och framtiden. Asylsökande barns välfärd, hälsa och välbefinnande*, eds H E Andersson, H Ascher, U Björnberg & M Eastmond, Centre for European Research at University of Gothenburg (CERGU), pp. 87-110.

Eastmond, M 2011, 'Egalitarian ambitions, constructions of difference: the paradoxes of refugee integration in Sweden', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2, pp. 277–295, DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2010.521323.

Giner, C 2007, 'The politics of childhood and asylum in the UK', *Children & Society*, vol. 21, no. 4, pp. 249–260, DOI: 10.1111/j.1099-0860.2007.00097.x.

Hage, G 2003, *Against paranoid nationalism: searching for hope in a shrinking society*, Pluto Press: Merlin, Annandale, N.S.W.: London.

Hek, R 2005, *The experiences and needs of refugee and asylum seeking children in the UK: a literature review*, University of Birmingham.

John, A, Lindstrom, C, Olszewska, Z, Williamson, K & Zongolowicz, K 2002, *Experiences of integration: accessing resources in a new society – the case of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers in Milton Keynes*, RSC Working Paper No. 10. Refugee Studies Centre, Oxford.

Khosravi, S 2011, *Illegal traveller. An auto-ethnography of borders*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Lennartsson, R 2009, 'De väntande barnen. Om asylsökande barns vardagstillvaro och syn på skolan', *Forum för skolan som kulturmiljö och arbetsplats*, Uppsala Universitet.

Lindquist, G 2006, *Conjuring hope: Healing and magic in contemporary Russia*, Berghahn Books, Oxford.

Lundberg, A & Dahlquist, L 2012, 'Unaccompanied children seeking asylum in Sweden: living conditions from a child-centred perspective', *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 54-75, DOI: 10.1093/rsq/hds003.

Löwén, Å 2006, *Asylexistensens villkor: resurser och problem i meningsskapande hos asylsökande barn i Sverige*, Teologiska institutionen, Uppsala universitet.

Malkki, L 1995, *Purity and exile: violence, memory, and national cosmology among Hutu refugees in Tanzania*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Nonchev, A & Tagarov, N (eds) 2012, *Integrating refugee and asylum-seeking children in the educational systems of EU member states,* Center for the Study of Democracy, Sofia.

Pinson, H & Arnot, M 2010, 'Local conceptualisations of the education of asylum-seeking and refugee students: from hostile to holistic models', *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 247–267, DOI: 10.1080/13603110802504523.

Pinson, H, Arnot, M & Candappa, M 2010, *Education, asylum and the non-citizen child: the politics of compassion and belonging*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Pinter, I 2012, *'I don't feel human'. Experiences of destitution among young refugees and migrants*, The Children's Society, London.

Rutter, J 2006, *Refugee children in the UK*, Open University Press, Maidenhead.

Svensson, M 2010, 'Barns vardagsliv under asylprocessen - en etnografisk studie' in *Mellan det förflutna och framtiden.* in *Asylsökande barns välfärd, hälsa och välbefinnande*, eds H E Andersson, H Ascher, U Björnberg & M Eastmond, Centre for European Research at University of Gothenburg (CERGU), pp. 173–205.

Svensson, M, Ekblad, S & Ascher, H 2009, 'Making meaningful space for oneself: photo-based dialogue with siblings of refugee children with severe withdrawal symptoms', *Children's Geographies*, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 209–228, DOI: 10.1080/14733280902798902.

Swedish Education Act 2010:800, Available from: <http://www.lagboken.se/files/SFS/2010/100800.PDF>. [Last accessed 8.5.2013].

Swedish Migration Board Statistics Bureau 2011, Personal communication with Hans Nidsjö 25 June 2012.

Swedish Migration Board 2012, *Children in the asylum process.* Available from: <http://www.migrationsverket.se/info/4328_en.html>. [Last accessed 8.5.2013].

Swedish National Agency for Education 2008a, *Rätten till utbildning: Om elever som inte går i skolan*, Rapport 309: Skolverket, Stockholm.

Swedish National Agency for Education 2008b, *Allmänna råd för utbildning av nyanlända elever*, Skolverket, Stockholm.

Swedish National Agency for Education 2012. Personal communication with Stefan Erson, Director of Education, Unit for Education Statistics 21 June 2012

Swedish Schools Inspectorate 2009:3, *Utbildning för nyanlända elever - rätten till en god utbildning i en trygg miljö*, Skolverket, Stockholm.

Swedish Schools Inspectorate 2012, Dnr: 40-2012:2991, *En skola med tilltro lyfter alla elever. Skolinspektionens erfarenheter och resultat från tillsyn och kvalitetsgranskning 2011*, Skolverket, Stockholm.

Swedish Schools Inspectorate 2013a, Dnr: 41-2012:5173, *Rätt till utbildning för asylsökande barn i Borgholms kommun*, Borgholm. Available from: <http://www.skolinspektionen.se/

Documents/Nyheter/riktad-borgholm-kommun.pdf>. [Last accessed 8.5.2013].

Swedish Schools Inspectorate 2013b, *Asylsökande barns utbildning granskas på bred front*. Available from: <http://www.skolinspektionen.se/sv/Tillsyn--granskning/Nyheter1/Asylsokande-barns-utbildning-granskas-pa-bred-front/?utm_source=nyhbrevapr&utm_medium=nyhbrevapr&utm_term=nyhbrevapr&utm_campaign=nyhbrevapr>. [Last accessed 8.5.2013].

Turner, V W 1967, *The forest of symbols: aspects of Ndembu ritual*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y.

Vitus, K & Lidén, H 2010, 'The status of the asylum-seeking child in Norway and Denmark: comparing discourses, politics and practices', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 62–81, DOI: 10.1093/jrs/feq003.

Watters, C & Ingleby, D 2002, 'Refugee children at school: good practices in mental health and social care', *Education and Health*, vol. 20, no. 3, pp. 43–45.

Williams, M 2012, 'Asylsökandes ersättning har blivit skamligt låg', *Dagens Nyheter 3.8.2012*. Available from: <http://www.dn.se/debatt/asylsokandes-ersattning-har-blivit-skamligt-lag>. [Last accessed 8.5.2013].