3. Uniformity Without Uniforms: Dressing School Children in Norway

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ABSTRACT This chapter discusses the relationship between Norwegian schools’ ideals of equality and the way in which school clothes are regulated. Interviews with a teacher in a transitional language learning group for newly arrived immigrant children, as well as with children and parents in immigrant families, are used to discuss whether school clothes inhibit or promote integration. The material shows great willingness of children to dress like the others, as well as understanding that clothing consumption is essential for integration in school, and thus society. At the same time, this is not easily achievable either economically, culturally or practically. Little is done to make Norwegian schools inclusive in this field of consumption.

KEYWORDS: school dress | integration | children’s wear | regulation | clothing consumption

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In public debate and politics there are strong opinions about clothes, and a will to strictly regulate such school attire as the use of hijab and burka. Other debated topics linked to the problems that clothes create in the school, include body-image issues, buying pressure, and sexualization. Beyond this, there is very little discussion about school attire in Norway. This also applies to school clothes related to immigrant groups. It is unnecessary to remind that clothing, and all appearance including hair, makeup, bags and shoes, the body’s movement pattern and shape, color and odor are essential to the way children, as well as adults, are seen: equal, respected or discriminated. Still, the obvious fact that we are different on the outside is a blind spot in the debate. Appearance is a non-existent theme (Klepp, 2009).

In this chapter, we are going to do exactly that: discuss clothes and the importance of appearance for integration in Norwegian schools. We understand clothes
in line with Entwistle as ‘situated bodily practice’ (2000, p. 3), and ask: Does the current way of regulating children's clothes in school contribute to promoting or preventing immigrant integration?

To answer this, we have analyzed formal regulations and dress rules for Norwegian schools, interviewed a teacher in a transitional group and analyzed interview material on food poverty, where clothes are often mentioned as examples and where many of the families are immigrants. We start by relating clothing consumption to a field we know more about, food. Both are consumption fields everyone partakes in and which in different ways also affect school life. Then we present some important discourses on school clothes in Norway today. This is followed by the empirical examples of school clothes, first through the eyes of a teacher in the transitional group, and then through descriptions given by the pupils and their parents with immigrant backgrounds. The chapter concludes with a discussion and a conclusion where we also point out the need for further research.

3.1.1 CLOTHES AND FOOD AS AREAS OF CONSUMPTION

Part of the material this chapter is based on, was collected in a project about food poverty and is used in chapter eight of this book about school meals. Clothing and food are discussed and understood differently. Food is subject to politics where nutrition, health, supply, self-sufficiency and practical knowledge are central and due to that, a subject taught in schools. There are public institutions in charge of food, food safety and nutrition policy. None of these institutions, subjects nor policy fields exist for clothing (Fletcher & Vittersø, 2018). Central to the discourse about food is that everyone must have food to survive and that food's composition affects health. This is obviously the case, but is also valid for clothes.

Both food and clothing are linked to social interactions and contribute in highlighting differences between people, seasons, weekdays, weekends and celebrations, and so on (Bugge, 2010a). The economic situation effects both consumption areas in our daily lives. Eating can, if desired, be hidden from others, as opposed to clothes, which are constantly present when meeting other people. It is not possible to take a break from our own appearance or clothing, as we can do with food.

Both fields of consumption are subject to strong norms and associated with taboos in different ways in different cultures. It is important in most cultures to hide some parts of the body from other people, and especially people of the opposite sex, but what and how much to cover varies. In the same way, bodily secretions and smells can evoke disgust, similarly to how eating taboo food causes great discomfort in most cultures. What is perceived as unsuitable food, or what is a bad smell, on the
other hand, varies. In other words, for food and clothing, there are cultural as well as personal and individual differences.

These consumption fields are closely linked to identity, status and indication of cultural and religious affiliation (Bugge, 2010b). In addition, they have practical consequences. Improper clothing makes physical activity difficult; one can get cold, sick or feel dissatisfied. Too little food leads to undernourishment or malnutrition and illness. Over-consumption or lack of food affects a person's appearance. In other words, there is a connection between food and clothing.

3.1.2 CLOTHING DISCOURSES

To the best of our knowledge, the importance of clothing for integration of immigrants in Norwegian schools has not earlier been researched. At the same time, the way school clothes are regulated in Norway, our informants’ stories, and our interpretations of them are characterized by some recurring discourses about children and clothing. We will therefore start by presenting these discourses and some of the research that describes and analyses them.

‘There is no bad weather; only bad clothes’ is a Norwegian saying and represents a national clothing discourse (Hebrok, Klepp, & Turney, 2016). The most important ideologist was Fridtjof Nansen (Klepp, Tobiasson, & Laitala, 2017), and this discourse has had a great impact especially on kindergarten children (Klepp & Tobiasson, 2013). A short version of the ideology is to ‘dress according to the weather’, which is practiced in particular in connection with what is called in Norwegian ‘friluftsliv’ (outdoor recreation) and is an important concept for Norwegian policies related to leisure time (Aall, Klepp, Støa, Engeset, & Skuland, 2011; Norwegian Environment Agency, 2016). Outdoor activities also characterize school and kindergartens in Norway, with emphasis on walking to and from school, outdoor classes and days, excursions, and prohibitions on staying inside during recess (almost) regardless of weather. Outdoor recreation is important in the Norwegian sports industry and their marketing. Clothes for sports and outdoor activities are important in the dressing of Norwegian children, and these types of garments are considerably more common in adults’ wardrobes than they are in other countries (Hebrok et al., 2016; Klepp, Vramo, & Laitala, 2014). Taking part in this type of clothing consumption is demanding for people with low income (see Skuland's chapter in this book and Aall et al., 2011).

The playing child. This discourse has roots in Rousseau’s (1762/2010) philosophy about children and education. It is well described by Berggren Torell (2007) for Sweden, but is equally important in Norway. Childhood is seen as a period of
life where children have independent value and should wear clothes that enable playing. This contrasts with the idea where children are seen as small or incomplete adults and are dressed as adults but in smaller sizes. The discussion about what good children's clothes are, was stronger in the second half of the 20th century than today, because now, children's clothes are also characterized by another strong ideal; youth fashion.

**Youth Fashion**. The norms for clothing follow age. Youth’s clothes are characterized by stronger accentuation of the body as a sexual object (Storm-Mathisen & Klepp, 2006). This is agreed upon both by the young themselves as well as adults, however they can disagree when a child becomes a youth (Klepp & Storm-Mathisen, 2005). Clothes for people in all ages are marketed on young models, and youth clothing became the ideal, or what is also called ‘fashion’, during the second half of the 20th century. Fashion is characterized by strong marketing interests that include the idea that it is constantly changing (Klepp & Laitala, 2015). Branded goods with associated names and symbols are central in this marketing and contribute to youth fashion being more oriented towards these aspects than the technical, practical and aesthetic qualities of the clothes.

**Freedom, Independence and Identity**. Responsibility for children’s clothing consumption is assigned to the adults and in particular to the mothers (Klepp & Laitala, 2018; Rose, 2013). Children and youth are economically dependent on adults (Storm-Mathisen, 2008). Nevertheless, the idea that children should be allowed to decide what to wear, in order to become independent and ‘find themselves’, stands strong. In practice, clothing styles for children and adolescents follow styles from other consumption fields, such as movies and music. Much of the research on clothes, including children’s and youth’s clothing, is focused on the different styles and fashion trends, and is linked to the idea of close association between dress and identity (Crewe & Collins, 2006). Fashion is popularly perceived as liberating, but demands conformity to normative expectation while allowing some freedom in interpretation (Tarlo, 2016). One way of understanding children’s right of self-determination thus becomes that control is transferred from the responsible adult in the family to the child, who is easily affected by peers and commercial powers.

**‘The Veil’** is the only clothing discourse explicitly about immigration. During the past three decades we have had debates about the visible presence of Islamic dress in Europe and North America (Tarlo, 2010; Tarlo & Moors, 2013, p. 1). The assumption that Muslim women are incapable of defending themselves against patriarchal family structures, religious ideologies or fundamentalist discourses, has been used to support restriction and control of clothing practices in European
countries (Tarlo, 2010, p. 3). The regulations vary between the different European countries, where France is an example of a country that has applied stringent regulation against use of full-face veils (Tarlo & Moors, 2013, p. 18). In Britain, multiculturalist policies and the state’s acknowledgment of visible expressions of religious and ethnic differences has resulted in the Sikh turban, Muslim hijabs and Jewish kipahs having become an integral part of school and work uniforms (Tarlo, 2010, p. 4). There is a rich literature based on clothing research about Muslim or Islamic fashion, especially from the UK (Lewis, 2015; Tarlo, 2007, 2010). In Norway, the debate about ‘the veil’ has been dominated by an understanding of the phenomenon as faith-related and not clothing-related, and with contributions from the history of religion (Kjensli, 2009; Thorbjørnsrud, 2004). The debate about the veil is not about children’s clothing as such, but it seems that covering children ignites stronger reactions than covering adult women. While the debate has been very focused on headgear, it is just a part of a larger picture about dress, which thus involves how the entire body is displayed and hidden through attire. This theme is also debated in relation to Youth Clothing with terms such as sexualisation, commercialization and pressure related to body-image and perfection.

3.1.3 REGULATION OF CLOTHING IN SCHOOLS

Education in Norway is regulated through the Act relating to Primary and Secondary Education (Education Act, 1998) that stipulate the educational goals and main regulations related to rights and obligations for education and schooling in Norway. It includes a requirement that the public primary education should be free of charge and have a good physical and social environment. The Ministry of Health and Care Services (1995) has added supplementary regulations and guidelines related to environmental protection in kindergartens and schools (Directorate of health, 2014), that should promote health, well-being and learning. In addition to these national regulations, many municipalities and schools have their own rules. Indirectly, the requirement of physical education and the daily organizing of the school day also includes a need for sports clothing. For example, schools expect pupils to be outside during breaks and can have a temperature limit for when they can stay inside. This temperature limit is usually between -15 and -20°C degrees (Moen, 2014). The municipality of Trondheim (2016) has given guidelines that are more detailed for appropriate dressing for cold days, which are in accordance with the common national understanding of proper clothing for children: wearing wool as the inner layer and a wind/waterproof outer layer. Nose and mouth should be covered with a scarf or buff. However, many schools do not have very specific
regulations or recommendations for clothing, aside from pointing out that pupils are responsible for acquiring all educational material specified by the school, including any special clothing, work wear and protective equipment (County Director of Education, 2016). The schools expect pupils to use recommended clothes and equipment for gym classes (Osloskolen, 2018). In addition, the current national learning plan includes a compulsory proficiency swimming test that all pupils must take by the end of their fourth school year (Regjering.no, 2017). Thus, even though the education act specifies that pupils are entitled to free public primary education, the schools can require pupils to acquire necessary clothing and swimwear for physical education, but not other specific equipment, such as skis or wrestling suits (Barneombudet, 2015; UDIR, 2015).

Many of the primary schools practice outdoors schooling one day a week. During that day, teaching takes place outdoors and pupils and teachers use the local environment and local community as a resource in the education. This is considered to promote learning and be beneficial for physical activity (Jordet, 2010), but also sets additional requirements for clothing.

In 2018, the Parliament approved legislation that prohibits students and teachers from wearing clothing that fully or partially covers the face in Norwegian schools, except if the use of such garments is based on climatic, educational, health or safety conditions (§ 9-7 of Education Act, 1998; Regjering.no, 2018). The ban is, although it is not stated directly, connected to the Muslim headwear niqab and burka. Many people also would like even stricter rules prohibiting hijab in primary school (Bulai & Elster, 2018). This form of detailed regulation of single items is in stark contrast to the vague and indirect regulation of clothing in general in Norwegian schools.

3.2 METHODOLOGY

In order to obtain first-hand knowledge about the integration process in schools, we have used an in-depth interview with a key informant as our main source (Marshall, 1996). She is called Ma (pseudonym) and has worked 6 years as a teacher for a transitional group where she meets an average of 12 new children each year. The group is for all new children who arrive in the municipality and do not yet speak Norwegian. They usually stay in the transitional group for one year, but sometimes a bit longer if needed. Her work also includes contact with the children’s families and teachers in primary and secondary schools where the children first visit as observers and will be transferred later. Therefore, she has a broad knowledge of the lives of her pupils and is a good informant for the purpose of our
study. Even though her experiences cannot be expected to cover all potential aspects related to our research question, her expertise gives us valuable insight that can also be used in the interpretation of the results (Wadel, 1991).

The school is located in eastern Norway within commuting distance to a larger city, and like many areas in Norway, there is ample access to forest and sea. The interview was conducted during June 2018 and lasted over one hour. The interview took place in an open and exploratory form, where we mainly tried to get an understanding of clothes as a problem related to (1) the well-being of children, (2) the opportunity to take part in learning, and (3) the opportunity to get to know each other across cultural backgrounds in primary and junior high school. We also asked some questions about whether clothing consumption and Norwegian habits were included in the teaching, and how clothes are regulated directly or indirectly. The individual children and their families were already anonymized by Ma, who emphasized confidentiality during the interview. We transcribed the interview and have chosen to analyse the material by focusing on some important themes and examples that capture the breadth of the mentioned main research themes, regulation and integration understood as the student’s well-being (Klepp, 2008), and participation in teaching and social life in the school.

Our second material is from interviews with vulnerable families also presented in Silje Skuland’s chapter in this book. In our analysis, we have used examples from four interviews where clothes were mentioned often. The informants we use are Aurora (15), Isaac (12), Mona (14), Susan (16) and their parents. The families are presented in Table 3.1. These four families reflect many of the discussions in the overall data material, which included 28 immigrant families. The interviews focused on the financial situation, which steered the conversations more towards the practical and material aspects of consumption. Interviews were conducted in 2015 to 2017 and transcribed. Some of the informants, especially the adults, speak poor Norwegian. In translation, we have improved the language somewhat for readability. Case summaries were produced for each of the informants structuring the themes discussed; everyday school life, food and eating, friends and socializing, resources and the relationship between expenses, material forms of poverty and future plans. We present citations here with pseudonyms.
TABLE 3.1 Informants’ background information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Living area</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Income in percent of median</th>
<th>Food exp. in percent of income</th>
<th>Parent arrival year</th>
<th>Young person’s arrival year</th>
<th>Number of children in household</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aurora</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Oslo</td>
<td>Middle-Eastern</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Born in Norway</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mona</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Oslo</td>
<td>East-African</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Born in Norway</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Oslo</td>
<td>East-African</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Born in Norway, lived abroad and moved back in 2013</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3 NEWCOMERS’ CLOTHING IN NORWEGIAN SCHOOLS

Here, we give some examples that are chosen to illuminate discourse for school clothing suitable for playing and the weather on the one hand, and the sexualized, body-exposing youth’s fashion on the other, based on interview with teacher for transitional group.

3.3.1 WOOL AND GOOD SHOES: ‘BEFORE YOU LEARN THE LANGUAGE, YOU MUST BE ABLE TO DRESS’

Our first example is about ‘dress according to the weather’ discourse, but also about how learning the Norwegian clothing culture takes place in the reception class. While the official material governing the regulation of clothing in Norwegian schools only indirectly includes dressing, as we have previously shown, the practices we learn through Ma are very concrete.

The most important task of the transitional group is to teach the pupils basic Norwegian. Both clothes and food are among the themes being taught. ‘Clothes are a topic of their own, since the pupils then learn all the words and concepts from underwear to outerwear and shoes. We have a concrete and practical approach to teaching,’ explains Ma. ‘Do you also teach how clothes are used’, we ask. ‘Yes, we do, it’s in the textbook, why we have the sou’wester rain hat when it's raining, and why we wear a woollen sweater when it's cold. In addition, we have them with
us and demonstrate. And have them with us and wear them when we go outdoors. And once they've learned that a woollen hat is fine and woollen sweaters, and scarves and mittens. Great to wear in winter when it is cold. Then the children learn it and then the parents learn it eventually’, but this is not that easy. The education of the children is direct and part of the school day, while reaching the parents and thus ensuring that the children have not only understood – but also given the practical possibility to take the knowledge into use – is not quite as easy.

The Norwegian discourse of dressing ‘according to the weather’ is perceived as so obvious that it does not need to be explained in greater detail. ‘We have written many times ‘clothes according to the weather’, everybody understands it in Norway. But it does not work, so we are very specific, we write and put pictures in the school letter on outdoor activities’. Still, the children are equipped with ‘something far from functional. It takes a long time and there are many who do not learn it at all’. The children, on the other hand, get more practical and direct training. ‘The children learn when we get outside, and they have become completely wet and it is cold, and then they get to wear the woollen sweater and woollen long johns and socks. There is great learning in this and it shows well-being, when the kids in many languages say that it’s nice!’ She believes teaching the parents earlier and more practically would be a good thing. ‘Because, before you learn the language, you must be able to dress’. We wonder whether it is the language, culture or economy that makes this difficult for the parents. This is of course a difficult question, but Ma thinks it's not related to economy, as layering with many T-shirts is also costly. However, ‘one must know where to go and buy the woollen shirt’. New patterns of consumption and markets require knowledge. ‘Where do you find the beans you are used to eating? It takes some time. And where do you find clothes. Then there are a lot of purchases of clothes that are not appropriate because they have not gotten enough details from us or from the adults (who are in charge of single minors). It takes a long time’. It is worth noting that in this discussion Ma has a clear idea of what is a correct way of dressing. In other words, the idea of ‘dress according to the weather’ is not discussed.

We asked whether the teaching is sometimes ruined because the children do not have good clothes. Ma tells that it is not, because ‘We fix, we fix, we always bring with us because we know. There will always be someone who does not have clothes according the weather, so we always bring clothes that suit the weather. Teaching is not necessarily ruined, but it will be different. Because we have not concentrated on moss on stone, and bark and berries, but talked about the foot, the shoe, the sock, wetness.’ When pupils and parents are unable or unwilling to follow the given advice, the pupil will be equipped with the right
clothes. This is not formally organized, but something Ma and her colleagues themselves initiate.

So far, Ma has talked the most about the youngest children, but the woollen sweaters meet another kind of resistance among the youth. ‘There are many clothes they are not used to.’ Ma now talks about it from the child’s perspective and speaks as if she was the one not wanting to wear a woollen sweater. ‘You land somewhere, and suddenly you’ll have to wear other things on your body. It takes time. So, therefore, they rather wear three T-shirts on top of each other even if it’s minus 20 degrees. Blue with cold.’

In the previous discussions, having wool next to skin has been central. This is an important part of the Norwegian clothing practice that clearly differs not only from many of the countries the children come from (e.g. Somalia, Afghanistan, the Philippines), but also from countries such as Sweden (Klepp, Laitala, & Tobiasson, 2016) and the UK (Hebrok et al., 2016). In the concept of appropriate clothing for the weather, also items like rainwear, wind-proof gear, shoes and boots are included. They should tackle rain, snow and ice without getting dirty, wet or making it too difficult to walk because it is slippery. Ma talks about this, and she takes a clear position: ‘Clothes according to the weather’ is the correct approach and something that needs to be taught as soon as possible. She argues that this contributes to better learning, and therefore the teacher should prepare and spend time teaching good and practical clothing habits.

In the next three examples, Ma takes a more cultural relativistic position. She no longer argues that clothes are something that have to be learned, nor the Norwegian clothing practices as being correct. Rather, she sees clothes as a meeting-ground where we need to find solutions together.

3.3.2 SWIMSUITS

Teaching all children to swim is one of the Norwegian school’s tasks. The equipment needed for this is considered to be the parents’ responsibility. In public debate, there is concern that the instruction is not good enough, especially for immigrant children, and that the swimming instruction is hampered by Muslim demands for modest dress (Assum & Nordbakke, 2013; Pedersen, 2018).

Dressing for swimming pools, where the instruction takes place, is strictly regulated and includes not only what garments to wear (swimming cap and bathing suits for girls and bathing trunks for boys), but also addresses that same sexes must undress and shower together (see for example Municipality of Bærum, 2015).
The transitional group has not swum in the local pool, but Ma explains that the pupils have been ‘swimming and bathing in the fjord’. They wore ‘a lot of different things, combinations and solutions for swimming. Also bathing fully clothed’. The practice in the transitional group has thus been completely different from the strict regulation that the school’s swimming instruction requires.

The children also participate in regular classes, and a teacher had reported to Ma that one of the girls from the transitional group had a bathing suit that was inappropriate. ‘The teacher was worried that she did not feel comfortable, or that it would be a cause for bullying because this pupil did not have a proper bathing suit, or modern, or new one, and could we collaborate on getting the pupil a bathing suit. So yes, we managed to.’ Ma does not think that the pupil had experienced this as a problem. ‘The pupil had never owned a bathing suit before, and her family had acquired a bathing suit but did not really understand how it is supposed to be. It may be that it was simply far too big and that was a purchasing mistake. Or that it was old and had lost elasticity, and that as she was a young girl, going through puberty, the suit was hanging around the body.’ The solution to the problem was in line with the way the transitional group otherwise handles clothing problems, to acquire what is needed on their own.

Clothes for physical education are a problem for the children, especially for girls when they transfer to a regular class level and leave the transitional group. ‘I think that maybe they do not have them, the gym clothes that the others have. They just do not have them.’ But the solution here is not that they acquire it, instead they choose not to participate. ‘It is like it is difficult to wear gym clothes, so the consequence is that they are less prone to participate in gym.’ Not participating in one of the subjects of the school is obviously a clear sign of lack of integration. The problem related to ‘Muslim girls’ and gym has been the subject of some public debate and some schools have tried to have separate boys’ and girls’ classes for gym as a way of getting everyone involved. This then again led to debate and a clarification from the Ministry of Education that coeducation applies also to this subject (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). This shows that physical activity in general and swimming education especially is a conflict area where no good solution has been found so far, seen from an integration perspective.

3.3.3 JEANS – ALL IN FOR BEAUTY

Jeans are very central garments in Western youth clothing and in the mindset of ‘freedom, independence and identity’. It is of course a paradox that everyone
should be free to choose the same garment for decades after decades, but the Western ‘fashion’ idea is filled with similar paradoxes. While jeans are mostly perceived as a sporty and practical and above all as youthful apparel in the west (Miller & Woodward, 2011), they are not seen as ‘easy’ items for Ma’s pupils.

‘Jeans have been very problematic. It has not really been something that they have expressed, it’s something I have seen. That it is tiresome and hard to wear jeans and especially if the jeans are tight, and especially early on for the young boys, that it is hard to sit with tight, unfamiliar pants, when you are not used to it, how they press the body. It interferes with the person’s ability to do other things’, Ma tells, and continues: ‘It is very clear that they want to wear the jeans, because everyone else does, so they want look like all the others. It is difficult. It’s all in for beauty, being like all the others. I think they just suffer through it. Everyone ends up owning jeans, both those that hang low on the buttocks and those fitted high in the crotch.’

Jeans are part of the children’s clothing culture that Ma avoids teaching them, ‘I’ve said: I see that the pants are tight, shouldn’t you be wearing a less tight pair of pants. “I take it off when I get home”, is the reaction I have received. I say that I see that it bothers you. I see that it is hard; I see that it hurts. Why don’t you wear the trousers you had yesterday that were loose and free?’ Here, Ma is talking about their own traditional loose clothes, sometimes used in school. ‘I’ve seen how comfortable they are. You sit and learn Norwegian and language and when there are no pants that exert pressure, so you can be free to do other things.’ Jeans are a garment the boys themselves want because their peers have them, even though they according to Ma make it difficult to concentrate on schoolwork while striving to get used to the unfamiliar garment. Here we see that integration understood as being socially accepted, and integration as well-being in the learning situation may conflict. Comfort has both social and physical aspects. Physically uncomfortable clothing requires attention, even when they provide social well-being (Klepp, 2008).

One aspect about the tight pants Ma talks about, is that others might react to the young guys’ struggle with jeans. Hands in the pockets, constant ‘relocations’ of genitals and fabric is improper behaviour. In other words, learning to use jeans does not only interfere with the child, but the way they are seen by others, and it is not given that everyone sees this as a learning process. Tight or loose, clothing is used to cover the body and sexuality. This is done in different ways and includes more than the clothes themselves. The way clothing is worn is an important aspect as well, and to learn proper wearing takes time.
3.3.4 SCANTILY DRESSED – EVEN MORE DIFFICULT THAN LEARNING NORWEGIAN

In connection with the bathing suit example, we saw how different perceptions of what being dressed or decently dressed can create difficulties. This topic does not apply only in the gym, but also to daily dressing.

Ma explains, ‘Girls in secondary school are very scantily-dressed here, wearing very short things, showing a lot of the body, and for some of my pupils it can be very difficult to walk around in the hallway or into a classroom, or stand at a bus stop together with them [the girls]’. Ma changes to the child’s perspective and says, ‘suddenly you’re in a world where people are naked around you.’ What it means to be dressed or naked depends both on context and culture. Tarlo and Moors (2013, p. 40) refer for example to Swedish rules for decency that allow for nudity in some situations. These are also relevant for the Norwegian context, as we saw in the example of bathing suits and swimming pool dressing regulations.

This is obviously a challenging topic, and we asked Ma how the pupils talked about this to her: ‘That's embarrassing, it's embarrassing. Teacher, it's embarrassing, I cannot take the bus, I have to wait for the next bus’. Or, ‘I do not want to go out, I want to sit here and eat, it is embarrassing to leave the classroom.’ The boys talked about it, but the problem also applies to the girls. ‘It's very clear, the gaze and the behaviour, it is not so easy to sit next to and be close when it's so different.”

In the example ‘Dress according to the weather’, the problem is that the pupils in the transitional group do not own appropriate clothes, and the solution is that the teacher provides the clothing. But how does the teacher solve the problem where the students have to get accustomed to the way Norwegian children are dressed? Ma answers: ‘I do not know. How do we solve it? In my situation as a teacher, we want a conversation about it, but I also want to allow them to not necessarily have to be together and sit together immediately, but that they can gradually adjust – and there is an adjustment period. And if they arrive too late because it's too embarrassing to take the bus, seeing the girls so scantily dressed and that they felt unprotected, so … as a teacher, the only thing I can do is understand. “It's good that you came on the next bus!”’. Again, we see that the chosen ‘solution’ is lack of integration, or at least that integration is slower. Getting used to being with people who are ‘naked’ compared to own clothing habits takes time.

‘It's even more difficult than learning Norwegian.’ Ma is keen to protect the boys from misunderstandings that can have major consequences for them. ‘I do that, and we talk about it. It is like this, the Norwegian girls have a right, they are entitled to wear clothes like that at school.’ She explains that this does not change the way the pupils should look or relate to girls. ‘You just neutralize yourself.’ But
to do that, ‘It’s a very big and difficult thing’ and ‘it’s hard that it is neither allowed to react in any way to scanty clothes, or to look down at the floor all the time.’

We ask if she has thought about saying something to the girls. Here’s Ma’s uncertain response ‘Maybe a teacher can say that, or maybe ask a school nurse about it, because it’s a sensitive topic, because you can come as you want and you should be able to wear what you want, and you should be able to wear a mini-skirt and very, very much cleavage, and be very eye-catching.’ Ma indirectly refers to the discourse we initially called ‘freedom, independence and identity’, but that also can be understood as free rein for a sexualized commercial youth culture that many, including Ma, have difficulties in accepting. Thus, an opportunity to facilitate integration is to encourage less undressed clothing practices. However, such a viewpoint is also problematic. Ma has not talked with the scantily dressed girls, ‘but I have wanted to’. She might have wanted to say, ‘Could you imagine that it seems difficult, provocative and like a barrier, so that if you want communication and contact, then you might need to meet them halfway?’ She does not believe that the other teachers would have said anything either as ‘they are allowed to wear what they want’. It is interesting that it is almost unheard of to respond to, or even more, to try to regulate the dressing in schools.

Let us now leave the transitional group and interview with Ma and rather look at our interview-material with poor immigrant families.

3.4 SCHOOL CLOTHES IN POOR IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

Several of the themes Ma talked about can also be found in the interviews with immigrant families, especially related to problems of dressing for the cold. As we spoke with the immigrants themselves and since these families struggle financially, the economic aspects of clothing consumption become more important.

3.4.1 DRESSING FOR THE COLD

Dressing warm enough appears to be a practical and economic problem in the interviews. Mona’s mother tells us: ‘In the beginning it was very difficult for us. We did not know how to dress in warm clothes, [it was] very cold, and we had regular Kenyan clothes. It was also very cold. [It was] a little depressing at the time, however we got over it’. Most of the immigrant families reflected how learning to dress properly for the climate and having the resources to buy clothes were urgent problems when they first migrated to Norway, similar to what Mona’s mother told us. Furthermore, most of the families had to learn how to
make the best use of little resources, including how to plan for, and where and when to buy, winter clothes.

Susan’s father says, ‘They need to get winter clothes, summer clothes are inconsequent, but winter clothes are... For example, I have six children, and everyone needs to buy winter clothes.’ One solution he points to is that NAV (Norwegian Labor and Welfare Administration) could hold back some of the support. ‘Every month you can hold back 1000 [NOK]. I can receive, when winter comes, 5000 or 6000 to buy clothes for the kids’. However, receiving financial assistance is designed to be a temporary support scheme covering only minimum expenses of basic needs. Thus, families can lose their support if they have too much disposable income. In practice, they only have the possibility to spend some money during the school holidays when the children do not need a packed lunch, as Skuland describes in the chapter on school meals, and when it is possible to find off-season sales on winter clothes.

Kindergarten, school and AKS (after school activity program) set requirements for clothes. Aurora’s mother talks about her younger daughter, a 6-year-old, who has mostly played with other Turkish children and therefore has not developed good Norwegian language. ‘Therefore, I felt I had to send her to AKS to, eh, develop her language, and to be close to Norwegian children or friends, and speak Norwegian’, however this is difficult economically. ‘I do not buy everything she asks for, but I allow her to buy some things, in order not to be different from the others. Eh. So that's pretty tough! And they (AKS)... they demand quite a lot, clothes and snowsuit and boots and everything. Two pieces, two pairs, right, and it's not cheap either, and in addition comes the milk cost.’ To play with Norwegian children requires clothes that look like their clothes. In addition, AKS sets requirements for the amount of clothing. This makes it financially difficult for the family, however they still try, as they believe it is very important that their daughter learns Norwegian. However, the expenses for clothes and equipment represents a too high threshold for low-income immigrant families. For Aurora’s family, the milk scheme for Aurora’s daughter had to be sacrificed for the benefit of proper clothing.

3.4.2 WHAT EVERYONE ELSE HAS

As previously shown, Norway has been very careful not to regulate the dress directly, except for the prohibition aimed at Muslim women’s headgear. There are no traditions for uniforms or other strict regulatory mechanisms for school clothes.

Susan (16) previously lived in the UK and used a school uniform. She perceived this as good ‘because you did not think about what to wear every morning. You
just have to put it on, and not think, and everyone has the same clothes.’ She confirms that there are certain things it is important to have now: ‘Yes, you must have Nike and Adidas and all those things.’ And what about jackets, we ask. ‘Svea and Canada Goose. You must have one of them or... [other people may think/say] ‘are you poor, or?’ That’s the way it is, at least other places’. If you don’t have the right jacket, ‘you are not bullied, but they look at you, like...’ Her theory is that ‘everyone owns one. Or, it is not everyone, but everyone you know owns one. Even though she owns the shoes, she doesn’t own the jacket. ‘I do not like the big jackets that much, there’s no point in buying them’. The young immigrants in this study often made use of concealing strategies, such as claims that they didn’t like certain clothes (or food) to avoid feeling shame in the eyes of others (Pugh, 2011, p. 12).

Further, Susan’s father talks about a Somali lady who had slept poorly because her 16-year–old son insisted on having an expensive jacket. ‘‘Buy the jacket or I will not attend school, because everyone else who goes there has, everyone has a given phone and jacket that costs 10 or 12 [thousand Norwegian kroner]. Mine is only 6,000, which is half price. Come on mom!’’ But I do not have the money!’ She had ended up borrowing money to be able to buy the expensive 10,000 NOK1 jacket for her son. The argument of having what the others have is repeated in the interviews. Most of the informants in this study do not question whether the jacket is warm, good-looking, or durable. What others have is important, and lack of money is a reason for not buying. However, for the parents who were buying a winter jacket, practical reasons were important: keeping their children warm during winter and managing to find ways to pay for clothes for their children.

3.4.3 INVESTMENT AND INNOVATION

When we asked Mona’s mother if she buys clothes for herself, she said, ‘[I’m] thinking most about the children.’ Others gave almost identical answers. Isaac’s mother confirms, ‘I think about my children all the time.’ Clothes for school and preschool are mentioned over and over again, rather than clothes for other occasions, such as parties, sport, or other leisure activities. In the interviews of the immigrant families, soccer shoes especially were mentioned to be a recurring financial challenge for growing children. Mona’s father explains that they do not have a lot of money and choose to focus on ‘how children can grow up and live here. We want to invest in our children’, and their future in Norway. What they

1. 10,000 NOK equals 1,027 Euros (Currency rate 5th September 2018).
need to be able to go to school is included in this, and prioritized ahead of other consumer goods, and the parents’ clothes. Susan’s father prioritizes in the same way ‘I talked about what we should do when school starts, as all children need new clothes, new shoes, backpack, everything!’

Mona’s mother talks about the children’s many wishes for clothes and other equipment, about how they postpone purchases, in order to not ‘worry them, when we talk to them’. The father follows up and explains how all consumer goods like ‘own car, own PC’ are within reach “But it takes time. You must try first and be good at school. Education. You can become a doctor, you can become an engineer. She has suggested getting shoes that cost maybe 1000. We say wait a little. Time has to pass. We have to plan. We have to budget.” Among the immigrant families with many children, waiting for your turn to get new clothes was also mentioned. All of the parents are keen to involve the kids in clothing acquisition. This involves both postponing the purchase, planning as they call it, but also that the children save and even contribute some of the money. The postponed purchases also ensure that things are bought when the prices are reduced. Aurora’s mother explains that when she buys things “It has always been seventy percent, not even half price. I wait for seventy percent off”.

3.5 DISCUSSION

Whether clothing in Norwegian schools is regulated or not, depends on how we see it. On the one hand, the formal rules are not very specific aside from the one almost peculiar exception, the ban on covering the face. On the other hand, indoor and outdoor activities are strictly regulated. Pupils are obligated to take part in outdoor activities, learning and classes, and to be outside during recess. This is practiced in rain, wind and in temperatures down to minus 20°C. For the smaller children, the schools also require an extra set of clothes at school. This might be demanding for the parents financially, practically or in terms of knowledge level.

It would be interesting to study these regulations more closely and see if schools with a large proportion of immigrants practice being inside and outside differently than other schools. The relationship between physical activity, economics and ethnicity is in itself interesting and will probably be possible to study precisely through greater emphasis on practical aspects, such as clothing and equipment. In our material, there is no resistance to nor any complaint about this aspect of Norwegian clothing culture, although both the cold weather and the requirement for clothes are perceived as demanding. The way the transitional group solves the problem of lack of clothes is not formalized and builds more on the fact that the
teachers fix and arrange things. We do not know but can assume that many children without such extra services from teachers, will get cold, wet and thus have less pleasure and ability to learn in outdoor situations. The lack of knowledge about clothing in Norwegian schools thus includes relationships between the emphasis on physical activity and the use of nature on the one hand, and lack of opportunity and knowledge to take part in the ‘clothing according to weather’ norm.

The relationship between equality discourse and economic inequality is discussed by Fernqvist (2013) based on the Swedish school. She points to clothes as one of the areas where poverty is visible (Gordon, Holland, Lahelma, & Campling, 2000), while previous research has shown the symbolic value of clothes as a vital part of self-presentation among children (König, 2008; Pilcher, 2011; Ridge, 2002). An important point made by Fernqvist is that the children are given the responsibility to conceal their poverty, because equality is given such high ideological meaning. One way to hide it, is to choose an alternative and less expensive clothing style, in her example ‘punk’. The role of being an outsider thus conceals the absence of the ‘correct’ clothes. An interesting question and possible topic for research is whether the popularity hijab has gained in the West can be understood as a result of a lack of financial ability to dress like the others. Choosing an obviously different look may be something that the Norwegian school forces children to, because they do not have financial resources to wear what ‘everyone else’ has. In our material, there is a clear acceptance among parents and children that having the right clothes and other consumer goods is vital for successful integration. They deal with the matter both physically, by getting used to unpleasant garments like jeans, and by prioritizing basically overpriced and impractical garments in a situation where they cannot afford everyday necessities. Investment in these products is seen as investment in school, education and a future in Norway. It is possible to interpret the absence of a discussion about the products’ price, quality and functionality exactly based on this. They are in a sense ‘school money’ and entrance tickets. The interpretation of Fernqvist’s ‘punks’ and comments like ‘I don’t like cross country skiing’ (Klepp & Skuland, 2013) or choosing the hijab are easily interpreted as selection of style and identity, but they might as well be choices that are made because other choices were not economically feasible. The great emphasis on identity in the understanding of youth can thus be part of not seeing differences, which is Fernqvist’s main argument.

In an article about distinction and use of consumer culture among children, Pugh (2011) points out that children use things to establish similarity and under-communicate differences. She therefore criticizes an important perspective in
sociology in the understanding of consumption: consumption as a way to show you are better than others. Desire to have what ‘everyone else has’ does not seem like a desire to distance oneself from something, but rather as a way of establishing equality. This is entirely in line with what our material also shows. An important question then becomes how this ‘everyone else has’ could become more accessible to everyone, regardless of economy and culture. Such a perspective questions the idea of ‘being free and choosing yourself’, and then again ‘identity’ in understanding of the children’s consumption. In this ideal of freedom, there is a lack of consideration that someone earns a lot of money when children are dressed in overpriced products. The high status the youth culture has in the dressing of children and youth contributes effectively to marketing of specific clothing. This is by no means a new perspective (Brusdal & Frønes, 2008), but as far as we know, this aspect has not been studied related to how to integrate immigrants into the Norwegian school.

The discussion of clothes in relation to integrating immigrants raises not only questions about their clothing but also the unclarified Norwegian ideals for dressing children. On the one side there are ideas of ‘clothing according to weather’ and the ‘playing child’, and on the other ‘freedom and self-determination’. However, in both of these discourses, commercial interests have strong voices. The first one is probably aimed primarily at adults, and the other through the youth culture towards the children themselves. The new clothing culture immigrant children should be dressed in, is thus both unnecessarily costly and unnecessarily impractical and sexualized. Both conditions contribute in making it difficult to be alike, a clearly expressed goal given by the children, parents and teachers. There is a striking absence of other alternatives, for example in the form of a ‘colourful community’; who are wearing different clothes. There is also a striking absence of attempts to restrict the commercial interests that occur within the walls of schools that otherwise aim to promote equality.

Mari Rysst (2015) has studied a multicultural school in Oslo and how friendships and gender identity are established. She emphasizes the relationship between ethnic background, choice of clothes and friendship. Not surprisingly, Rysst described how ‘the girls used appearance and clothing style for visualizing what the acceptable gender constructions were for girls their age’ (Rysst, 2015, p. 496). Three different styles are described; ‘Norwegian’, ‘ethnic-religious’ and ‘hybrid’, that in practice are about how much of the body is covered. The study focused on the same girls in 6th and 9th grades. While they all chose a Norwegian style in 6th, there are many more who chose to cover up a larger portion of the body in the 9th grade. Style and ethnicity also play more of a role in who is friends with
whom. Rysst emphasizes puberty as an explanation for this change, however, it might be interesting to investigate whether economy also plays a role. Are the different ‘styles’ equally expensive?

Whatever the price tag, it is also possible to take the perspective teacher Ma suggests. Integration would be easier if there was less contrast, if what Rysst called ‘Norwegian’ style was a little less tight-fitting, body-focused and undressed. When the limit of what it means to be ‘dressed’ is set so close to being naked, many more will feel the need to choose an alternative to the Norwegian style. Again, we see that the ‘ethnic-religious’ style can be perceived as a reaction to our clothing culture. This sexualized clothing culture can be challenging for both boys and girls, and it is less suitable for integration and good relationships across gender, religion and ethnicity.

What and how much of the body is to be hidden with clothes varies between different cultures and religions (see also Dahl-Michelsen’s chapter in this book). In our material, too much or inappropriate presence of sex is a part of the young boys’ struggle with tight jeans, the swimsuit that did not fit properly and of course, the very tight-fitting, undressed style discussed by Ma and Rysst (2015). These examples show that the limit of nudity is not just a matter of covering the body with clothes, but also how we move in and relate to clothes and how the clothes fit. It is not necessarily easy to understand that the tightness of the bathing suit ‘covers’ more than a larger suit does. It is not just how much skin it covers, but how the skin is covered. These are subtle differences, which are not that easy to learn.

3.6 CONCLUSION

Norwegian schools strongly support the idea of unity and democracy, but this does not include consumption, and especially not clothing. Unlike in many countries, school uniforms are not used, nor are there any clear rules or guidelines for dressing. School meals are also a private matter, although this is supplemented by collective solutions and an ongoing debate about whether this should be more collective. In spite of the strong ideals of equality, Norwegian schools have lower regulation of consumption than, for example, Sweden where they offer communal school meals and the UK where both food and clothing are the same for everyone, through school canteens and uniforms. We believe that this creates specific conditions for integration in Norwegian schools that should be the subject of further research.

We have shown a clear and proven willingness to be and become like the others, and to have ‘what the others have’, and an understanding that clothing consump-
tion is essential for integration in Norway through school integration. This applies to both the children and their parents. At the same time, ‘what the others have’ is not easily obtainable, either economically, culturally or practically. It seems that little is done to reduce the entrance fee to Norwegian schools. There is thus an interesting contrast between the Norwegian school’s clear ideology about equality, and lack of will to use this central consumption field to create equality.

We initially asked whether the current way of regulating children’s clothes in school contributes to promoting or preventing immigrant integration. Our answer is that it prevents it. We have not investigated the existing ban of using face-covering clothing, however, we have seen this in the unclear and likely unintended regulation of clothes in terms of taking part in indoors and outdoors activities in varying weather. In addition, material shows that other groups such as children from families with a poor economic situation, may also have problems with Norwegian school clothes. We believe it is an important question to investigate how clothing consumption can be regulated, so that it promotes integration, including considerations for different vulnerable groups, such as immigrants, children from poor families, and for those with divergent bodies, be it over-weight, disability or other challenges.

REFERENCES


