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## Young people's experiences and meaning-making at a multicultural festival in Norway

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores young people's experiences and meaning-making at a multicultural festival. Multicultural festivals aim to promote inclusion and challenge problem-oriented discourses in current debates on diversity and migration. Listening to youth voices from such a festival gives a sense of how young participants perceive representations of cultural difference, and how they relate these representations to their own identity and sense of belonging. The participants in our study are 86 young people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds between the ages of 12 and 20. They recorded answers to our questions about what they did at the festival as well as the memories that participation evokes using a specially developed app. Interpreting the broad spectrum of their reflections in the light of theories about intercultural learning and citizenship, we found that the young people were eager to learn about the Other by experiencing cultural differences and engaging with traditions different to their own. In addition, they experienced the festival as an inclusive space, open for transnational identities, and evoking a sense of safety and belonging. We conclude by arguing that the young participants take with them experiences and memories of diversity as the norm rather than the exception.

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## Introduction

Every June, for the past ten years, volunteers in a municipality of Norway come together to organize 'Stoppstedet Verden' (Flag Stop World), an international children's and youth festival located in Hamar, a medium-sized town in the south-eastern part of Norway. The festival attracts more than 11,000 visitors every year, which makes it the largest of its kind in Norway. The main aim is to 'focus on the knowledge of our multicultural diversity' and to 'surprise, motivate and trigger an interest for and understanding of the values within the world's many diverse cultures' (Stoppstedet Verden 2018). To reach this aim, the festival offers workshops, activities, exhibitions, international food, and cultural

performances. The management and the volunteers consider the festival to be a tool to promote intercultural awareness, social cohesion, and inclusion in an increasingly diversified social context. In this way, they negate the view of cultural, linguistic, and religious differences as problems to be handled, and rather aim to make diversity visible and recognized as a valuable resource, thus on these grounds worthy a colorful celebration.

In this article, we ask what characterizes young people's experiences and meaning-making while attending 'Stoppested Verden'. The aim is to better understand how young people experience their participation in such a festival in the light of a political climate, where grounds for inclusion in, or exclusion from, the national 'we' has become a highly contested issue, and where some leading politicians frame cultural differences as a threat to national cohesion (Muis and Immerzeel 2017). In contrast, the festival volunteers have designed a celebration of cultural variety through traditional cultural markers such as national costumes and traditional music, but also through playful activities and installations that mold and transcend cultural divides, such as the display of an enormous, glittering Hindu-goddess-like marionette representing Scotland. For this study, we joined the festival as researchers to listen to the voices of young people and to understand their perspectives on what it means to participate in such an event. Their answers can be understood in the light of theories about intercultural learning and citizenship. Intercultural learning captures the acquisition of skills, knowledge, and dispositions that enable communication across boundaries and cultural divides (Lane 2012). In other words, intercultural learning is centered on diversity, and argues that our approach to cultural differences matters. The concept of citizenship, on the other hand, can be said to take sameness as its starting point, accentuating the grounds of social cohesion, a shared sense of belonging, and membership of a community. Citizenship has traditionally been conceptualized as subjects belonging to a particular territory (Kymlicka and Donaldson 2017). In today's globalized society, however, conceptualizations of citizenship are changing to include the sense of belonging to several places or to groups that are not territorially defined (Stokke 2017). Intercultural learning involves exploring encounters with difference, whereas citizenship education asks how to accommodate difference in community formation.

Multicultural festivals and other arenas for inclusion have been objects of interest during the last thirty years (van den Dungen and Yamane 2015; Woodward, Bennett, and Taylor 2014; Lee 2015). Studies from fields such as pedagogy and sociology articulate a predominantly critical position, referring to these happenings as examples of 'ethnification' (Øzerk 2008, 223), 'hallway multiculturalism' (Hoffman 1996, 546), 'lazy multiculturalism' (Watkins and Noble 2019, 295), and, with reference to Barry Troyna's well-known words, as celebrations of 'saris, samosas, and steel drums' (Troyna 1987, 318). In contrast

to the organizers' good intentions, critics claim that multicultural festivals are counter-productive to the aim of cohesion and inclusion in society.

Other studies place more emphasis on the participant perspective. Michelle Duffy (2005) explores participants' performative identities within an Australian multicultural music festival. She argues that festivals are more than a 'simple celebration of social cohesion', and that they have potential to 'destabilize notions of identity and belonging' (679). Insun Sunny Lee's festival research, conducted in South Korea and Australia, points to similar findings (Lee, Arcodia, and Lee 2012). Particularly interesting is Huang and Lee's article on visitors with different ethnic backgrounds and their 'motivations for attending a multicultural festival', which point to 'learning new things, socialization, and family togetherness ... celebrating own culture, nostalgia', as key findings (Huang and Lee 2015, 94). These are also prominent findings in our material. In this article, we share the notion that participant perspective is significant for unpacking the qualities that make people experience multicultural events as meaningful. We further advocate the importance of a youth perspective. Young people's perceptions of cultural diversity and togetherness are important here and now, but they can also be indicative of future change (Duckworth, Allen, and Williams 2012). In listening to and analyzing accounts of young people's experiences and meaning-making at a multicultural festival, we acquire a sense of how young people perceive representations of cultural differences and gain access to their reflections on how these relate to their own identity and sense of belonging.

### **Theoretical perspectives on intercultural learning and citizenship**

Intercultural learning refers to the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that support learners' abilities to interact with and understand people from cultures different to their own (Lane 2012). This particular type of learning has gained widespread interest since the end of World War II, which saw an increased need for international communication and interaction across borders (Nynäs 2006). Professional practitioners, such as health workers, business people, and immigrant workers, asked for tools and guidelines to perform their profession in a new and foreign cultural context. In response, a wide-ranging business of diversity management has influenced the field, conceptualizing intercultural learning as the process of deciphering cultural codes and identifying cultures' deep structures in order to enable effective communication (Hall 1959; Hofstede 1989; Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel 2007).

Often, the concepts intercultural and multicultural are used interchangeably, but they also carry different connotations. Nynäs (2006) argues that 'intercultural' refers to the interaction and communication between people from different backgrounds (Nynäs 2006). 'Multicultural', on the other hand, describes the existence of different cultures within the same society (Kymlicka 2003). We use

the terms intercultural and multicultural according to this distinction. Hence, we use multicultural to signify the festival's character as an event gathering a highly diverse group of people. We describe it as intercultural to represent the festival's aim to contribute to closer relations and mutual understanding between people from different backgrounds. Being aware that the terms are guided by different theories and theoretical frameworks, there are nuances, similarities and differences between the concepts, that we are not able to address in this article. Nevertheless, by aligning the festival both to a multicultural and an intercultural concept, we seek to uphold the festival volunteers' understanding their own work, having designed the festival as an inclusive gathering of cultural expressions, while also aiming to bring people from different backgrounds in contact with each other.

In recent years, however, a growing body of research has critically questioned a conventional understanding (Hannam and Biesta 2019; Marotta 2009; Nynäs 2006). The argument is that the aim to control, explain, and predict the outcome of the learning process threatens to reduce intercultural learning to a mechanistic model that defines, classifies, and labels people in a highly problematic way. According to Nynäs (2006, 24), a conventional approach to intercultural learning inevitably runs the risk of downplaying the dynamic character of culture, 'dismantling human interpersonal interactions into a mechanistic set of laws'. Moreover, when differences are 'tribalized' and traced back to specific cultural communities, cultural perceptions may be reinforced in ways that shut off identity options for people (Cummins 2009). Thus, cultural boundaries are ambivalent as 'they can provide the conditions to construct an identity by establishing difference between self and other, but they can also provide the grounds to suppress and exclude other' (Marotta 2009, 279).

Recognizing the dynamic and non-essentialist features of culture has implications for the understanding of knowledge, skills, and attitudes as key elements of intercultural learning. With regard to knowledge, intercultural learning means to counteract negative cultural stereotyping which colonizes others' experiences and backgrounds, and, instead, to acknowledge the hybrid nature of both individual and collective identities (May and Sleeter 2010; Brown 2009). As for skills, the process of intercultural learning enables people to understand, act, and communicate in cultural encounters of various kinds without reducing the other to an inverted image of oneself or failing to recognize difference (see Said 2003). Rather than fall into the trap of labelling and defining the other, intercultural learning encourages an openness and curiosity that refrains from objectifying the other (Hannam and Biesta 2019). With regard to attitudes, intercultural learning implies the opportunity to develop positive attitudes and critical-ethical thinking that may challenge power structures and discrimination. This includes actively counteracting a cultural deficit model which asserts that people from cultural and linguistic minorities do not achieve as well as their majority peers in school and life because their home culture and

languages are deficient and dysfunctional compared to the dominant majority group (Gitz-Johansen 2009). Instead of interpreting differences as a barrier to understanding, cultural and linguistic diversity provides opportunities for interaction and broadening perspectives.

Studying processes of intercultural learning means engaging with individuals' identities and how their perceptions of self and other are activated and modified in their encounters with difference. Studying processes of citizenship formation involves the same relational perspective, but with more regard to collective identities.

Pratt (2012) distinguishes between two meanings of citizenship: one centers on the boundary that separates insiders from outsiders and decides who is included in or excluded from a community. Bosniak (2006: 99; italics in original) describes this meaning of citizenship as '*hard on the outside and soft on the inside*', explaining how those on the inside are subject to levels of care that outsiders are denied. The other meaning of citizenship that Pratt (2012) identifies reflects a point of view from within the community, where citizenship appears as a set of entitlements and responsibilities or rights and duties. Viewed from the inside, citizenship is not about boundaries, but is rather a universalizing aim to secure the rights of everyone.

The conventional approach to citizenship formation has been to study it as it occurs in relation to a state (Staeheli 2011). Hence, the exclusionary boundaries of citizenship and inclusiveness on the inside have referred to state boundaries and rights guaranteed by the state. In his analysis of citizenship literature, Stokke (2017) notes that the state-centered conceptualization has become less prevalent and that new, different interpretations of the concept, such as ecological citizenship (Schindel 2015), reflect the open and changeable nature of citizenship. Citizenship has evolved throughout history as a result of popular mobilization against injustice. Marshall's (1992) seminal account of citizenship shows how such mobilization first enabled civil rights and, later, also political and social rights. Marshall's analysis indicates how also current struggles for social justice can produce new dimensions of citizenship. The very complexity of the citizenship phenomenon makes it a difficult object to analyze. Faced with this challenge, Stokke (2017) identifies four core dimensions of citizenship: judicial status, rights, membership, and participation, the latter two being of particular importance in our study. The four dimensions show how citizenship can be partial and incomplete as it is possible to have judicial status as a citizen, but still be discriminated against and prevented from full membership and the possibility of participating. There are also groups of people, like long-term illegal immigrants, who lack judicial status, but who are participating members of local communities. Children and young people are another group that have judicial status and membership but who do not have the right to vote and have limited rights and options to participate in the community.

Within citizenship education, there is a long-standing tendency to consider young people as not-yet-citizens rather than as citizens in their own right (Hayward 2012). Nishiyama (2017) argues that in spite of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, children's status as citizen is not fully recognized. The most common reasons for viewing children as future citizens rather than actual citizens are their dependency upon parents and caretakers and not fully developed capacities. Kymlicka and Donaldson (2017) argue for a broader conceptualization of citizenship that will not be affected by children's differences from adults, where everyone affected by the norms of a shared society has an equal right to influence these norms. In the context of a multicultural youth festival, the underlying question at stake is the right to membership of and a sense of belonging in the community. In what Pratt (2012) describes as the boundary-making sense of citizenship, perceived membership does not necessarily follow a clear-cut line between outsiders or insiders. Young people can experience exclusion from the collective 'we' based on perceived difference from the social group whose 'particular characteristics dominate as seemingly universal characteristics' (Isin 2017, 502).

Performative citizenship can be a means to counter and prevent such exclusionary attempts by establishing more inclusive practices. Isin (2017) shares the notion of citizenship as being the result of struggles against injustice, and she discusses how making claims to rights, such as the right to belong, can in itself contribute to deepening citizenship or extending it to new groups. Making a claim does not have to be a revolutionary act; sometimes, acts such as dressing in clothes that are not expected of one's gender or speaking another language in public can serve as claiming the right to belong and the right to be recognized as a citizen. Hence, multicultural festivals' display of different ways to dress, eat, celebrate, and express oneself within a community can be analyzed as instances of performative citizenship.

### **The study and its methodological approach**

As mentioned, the festival takes place in Hamar, a town in the county of Innlandet (Inland Norway). The county's demography is less diverse in terms of immigrants and their children than the national average, that is, 11% as opposed to 17%. During the multicultural festival, our team of four researchers became part of the program under the name *Bobla* (the bubble), which refers to the yellow Poleta camper that the festival management made available to us in a central place at the festival site. As a result, we, too, were seen as providers of one of the many 'meeting places between people', where young people 'get the opportunity to know each other in a setting which is a safe space, where basically everybody is curious and wants to learn something' (interview with management, 22 June 2018; our translation).

Prior to the festival, we conducted semi-structured interviews with the festival's management (100 minutes), and studied the festival webpage and other information material in order to contextualize the young people's reflections. To access young people's voices, we developed an app which allowed us to conduct formal interviews on site in the Poletta.<sup>1</sup>

We called our app *My Memory App*, a name that mirrored our interview questions: 1. Please, tell us something about what you have done at Stoppedsted Verden; and 2. Which thoughts and memories does the event evoke? The app interviews share characteristics of formal, structured interviews (Richards 2003, 51–52). The questions were fixed and designed to elicit responses that focused on our topic of interest. Unlike face-to-face or telephone interviews, it was not possible for us to ask follow-up questions. Instead, the open prompts were carefully thought through, and were sensitive to person and situation (Richards 2003, 65). Both questions were piloted to different audiences, including newly arrived students from multiple language backgrounds and with varying experiences in terms of digital tools in order to ensure that both the prompts and the technicalities were clear to potential participants. The first question was intended as an 'easy start', meaning that the young people could bring up whatever they had been up to while attending the festival, although we also expected the answers to reflect what more specifically had caught their attention and involved them in some way. The second, more open, question was intended to facilitate more reflective, meaningful, and personal responses, but without leading them toward specific issues (such as multicultural awareness and/or learning).

In terms of recruiting participants, we approached young people who were passing by and told them about our study. When they agreed to participate, a member of the team would staple a numbered ticket to a notebook and write down the person's gender, age, and language background, as well as other contextual field notes. He or she would then show the young person into the camper, write the number on the iPad, which was attached to a tripod, select the language of the young person's choice, and leave the camper.

The private recording space of the camper, and the fact that the young people recorded (or refrained from recording) their own answers without the research team listening in gave more power to their responses than is common in both structured and semi-structured interviews. We thus saw our methodology as context and participant sensitive in the sense that the camper resembled the other festival activities, and the app-interviews enabled young people to communicate in a private space. Although longer, on-site semi-structured interviews would perhaps have given us longer answers, it would have been more difficult for us to break down the hierarchies between the researchers and the researched, a topic which is often addressed in youth research (te Riele and Brooks 2013; Richards, Clark, and Boggis 2015).



We set out to recruit a variety of young people in terms of gender and age, and in terms of cultural and linguistic background. In this way, we hoped to gain insight into different ways of experiencing the event. Being a white, mixed gender, mainly Norwegian-speaking research team in our 40s, we undertook two measures to ensure variety in participant backgrounds. First, in order to reach out to young people who might be learners of Norwegian and who might prefer to express themselves in other languages, we provided written translations of the instructions and interview questions in 35 different languages, as well as giving oral translations into Arabic and Kurdish. Secondly, as three of the research team live in the area of the festival and have many acquaintances from different minority groups, we actively drew on participants from these groups during data collection. We are nevertheless aware of our outsider positionality. If we had been able to work together with more visible minority research colleagues, we might have been able to attract a greater percentage of young minority people (see, e.g. Conteh, 2018: 100–102 for a longer discussion of researcher positionality and multilingual research).

Across the two festival days, 86 young people between the ages of 12 and 21 recorded their answers to our interview questions: 60 girls, 24 boys, and 2 of unknown gender. Most young people (57) went into the camper alone. On seven occasions, two friends asked to go into camper together and, on five occasions, three friends went in together. Some of these duos and trios recorded their answers together, whereas others recorded their answers one after the other, listening in to each other's answers. Some participants preferred to record their answers in Norwegian despite reporting that they knew several languages. Three girls who went into the camper together recorded their answers in Arabic. One of them wanted to listen to the questions in Arabic, whereas the others read them from the screen. Another girl preferred to have the questions in Norwegian and then recorded her answers in Arabic. Two boys said they preferred Pashtun, which was a language we were unable to provide. One was more fluent in Norwegian and helped the other translate our questions.

Data Protection Services for the Norwegian Center of Research (NSD) required us to inform participants about the study, but we were not required to collect signatures from either the young people or their guardians. In addition, the young people who participated gave double consent: first by agreeing to go into the camper; and, subsequently, by recording their answers. Of the 86 who went into the camper, three failed to record an answer to the first question and six to the second. One recorded in Norwegian 'I did not understand', which may also be the reason why the others did not record an answer. Another participant said in English 'Well, while this is happening, it's recording our voice. In which case, anything can be said, really. You can't control what is said'. This illustrates the power given to young people when provided the opportunity to record in a private space in contrast with a face-to-face interview situation.

In terms of analysis, all recordings were transcribed and, when necessary, translated into Norwegian, which was the working language of the team. We started our analysis by reading the transcripts on our own, identifying themes across the data, before meeting and discussing these. Openness to the data was central to our approach. We looked for connections between words, expressions and views, and kept an eye open for anything that was puzzling or surprising, as well as for expected patterns or representations of culture considering the nature of the festival. Recurrent themes in the data are the young people's reflections on learning about others, their food, traditions and culture, as well as thoughts about travel, sense of belonging and togetherness. On the grounds of these themes, we constructed two broad categories, that is, 'learning about diversity' and 'being a citizen', which we turn to now.

### **Youth voices**

In this part of the study, we focus on young people's experiences and meaning-making while attending the festival. More specifically, we identify how they represent their experiences and make sense of the festival by engaging in discourses around learning about food, and culture as well as their thoughts on belonging, togetherness, and travel. The following analysis has two parts. The first part addresses the here-and-now dimension of the young people's participation, their sensing of and engagement with cultural diversity within the frames of the festival. This part of the analysis is facilitated by insights from intercultural learning as a field. The second part of the analysis draws upon the young people's answers to the question of what thoughts and memories participation in the festival evoked. In talking about this, both the sense of belonging and the imageries of travelling were important issues that threw light on the young people's conceptions of togetherness and the role of diversity. In analyzing this, perspectives from the citizenship literature are of particular importance.

### ***Learning about diversity***

In the interviews, the participants describe the festival as an opportunity to get together in a multicultural environment to have fun, join in creative activities, and absorb new cultural impressions. Responding to the prompt 'Please, tell us something about what you have done at Stoppedstedt Verden', they highlight the many activities and workshops at the festival such as face painting, dance workshops, and tasting food from all over the world. Several mention the opportunities to explore the many cultures and traditions on display at different stalls while walking around the festival site. Many emphasize the joy of seeing and listening to artists performing traditional and contemporary music. Others express that they have taken part in dances

and visual art forms. Hence, for the children and young people, participating in the festival implies the celebration of cultural diversity in a variety of ways. One of the participants, a 16-year-old boy, describes his multifaceted participation in the following way:

Today, at Stoppested Verden, I have tasted different types of food from different cultures. Among other things, I have watched a movie and danced to different types of music. I have experienced various performances from the main stage, and tried pulling the ropes of a giant glittering marionette, which was quite new to me.

He continues by emphasizing the joy of experiencing cultures and the interest it evokes in him to take an active part in the festival events:

Stoppested Verden gives me a lot of different thoughts about how various cultures [in] the world are. It evokes a certain experience in me that makes me want to discover more. It is very interesting, not only watching television about how music, taste, food, mood are, but actually being allowed to experience it. And, when all these cultures are gathered in one place and [one] only has to walk a couple of meters to come to a new place, for instance, from Greenland to the Philippines, I find that quite educational and a lot more interesting and fun than watching television or reading a book.

This participant's engagement with discourses on culture and food is illustrative for the interview data. In several of the other interviews, the participants describe being given the opportunity to learn about what it is like living in another culture, about cultural practices that are common in different parts of the world, what the food tastes like, and how people make sense of their lives. In addition, one participant describes this process of learning not as a static, passive, and observational approach. Rather, by becoming actively involved in the cultural activities, seeing, tasting and smelling the food, experiencing real differences through interaction and communication with different people, the young boy describes a process of active learning, finding his participation at the festival 'quite educational'.

Travelling was another theme many of the participants reflected on in the interview data. First, the festival evoked many travel memories in the sense that attending the festival reminded the participants of their own journeys and holidays with their families. For some, walking around the festival site, they recognized places they had themselves visited, whereas others emphasized that the festival made them want to travel more, and to new places. One of the young people said that 'The festival gives me many thoughts about how the different cultures in the world are. It triggers me to discover more'. Another said, 'At the festival we experience different cultures from different countries without spending thousands of money on plane tickets'. Many of the participants use words such as 'discovering', 'experiencing', and 'exploring' when referring to travelling. The following statements from three young girls (aged 12) are particularly illustrative as they describe their attendance at the festival as a journey:

I have walked around and watched which countries have different cultures and such, and the different flags all the countries have.

We have walked around and watched the different countries and what they are quite good at.

I have walked around and watched the different cultures and stuff, and how the different flags look, that I didn't really know before.

The young people, here, are describing their role as spectators: they walked around and 'watched the different countries'. This could lead to an interpretation of the young people as passive observers, as engaging in 'Hallway multiculturalism' (Hoffman 1996). However, even in these examples, which appear to underpin a traditional understanding of intercultural learning, we argue that one should not undermine the value of seeing and understanding something new, to know what 'I didn't really know before.' This can be seen as a possible first step toward learning about diversity, a first step ahead of doing what most of the young people did at the festival, being actively involved in the various activities:

There is so much we have never seen before. (Girl, aged 12)

I learned quite a lot of new things and I'm able to experience new things. (Girl, aged 15)

[I have] experienced new cultures which was very exciting. (Boy, aged 19)

[I have] done new things that I haven't done before. (Boy, aged 11)

In these and in many similar statements, the youth express 'joy' and 'appreciation,' and that the festival was 'inspirational' and made a 'strong impression'. The exclusively positive emotional aspects serve to emphasize the significance of these experiences. In addition, the excerpts above signal an openness and curiosity for diverse cultures, and a way of encountering differences without objectifying, devaluing or alienating 'the other' (Hannam and Biesta 2019). In some cases, this also triggered ethical reflections, a concern for 'the other':

It's a little fun to see how it is in other countries, to see that maybe in some countries it is not so good ... to see what people really are doing in their country and, in a way, experience that. It's quite exciting to hear about how people live their lives, if they feel good or if they may not feel fine ... I will remember the festival for that. (Girl, aged 12)

For this young girl, her joy and appreciation of being at the festival are articulated as a positive, empathetic attitude toward people living under difficult circumstances, an attitude we see in several other interviews. When talking about the music she had heard, the food she had tasted from the Philippines, 'doing interesting things and meeting exciting people', a girl, aged 15, also reflected on cultural differences and the lack of equality between people: 'It also reminds me much about the difference between us people, and that everyone is

worth just as much. It reminds me of the refugee crisis, and to see Afghanistan, for example, which is a land destroyed by war’.

In sum, the selected interview extracts illustrate a general image of the young people’s eagerness to learn about the other, not through the acquisition of information about different cultures, but by experiencing cultural differences and engaging with traditions different from one’s own. Hence, one could interpret this as an openness and curiosity toward the other, which goes beyond the understanding of intercultural learning as labelling and demarcating cultural differences in an essentialist and stereotypical way (Nynäs 2006). From this perspective, participating and learning at the festival does not mean to extend the knowledge of what is believed to be the essence of the particular cultures. Rather, for the young participants, the festival seems to intrigue and evoke an interest and attentiveness for learning. Based on the interviews, the young people’s participation and activities at the festival seem to inspire them to enhance their skills of understanding and interacting with the diversity of cultures. Not least, in describing their experiences and meaning-making through their activities at the festival, one could say that the young participants draw lines between the diversity at the festival and the current challenges in contemporary society, creating empathy and understanding for the other, as well as distancing themselves from problem-oriented discourses on migration and diversity. Hence, for the children and young people, their participation seems to highlight the potential to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are central for intercultural learning to take place.

### ***Being a citizen***

With its numerous fun activities, tasty food, and lively atmosphere, as described in the previous section, the festival is first and foremost described as an inclusive event for families and friends from various backgrounds, and not as a place where participants are confronted with topics such as injustice, exclusion, intolerance, and racism. However, the interviews show how the festival also evokes thoughts and reflections among the young people on how diversity relates to togetherness, citizenship, and participation (Stokke 2017; Pratt 2012). The young festival participants talk about citizenship when reflecting on the interaction between different people at the festival, how bodily experiences of foreign cultural traditions have become childhood memories, how they sense transnational identities as being in place at the festival, and how the festival participation evokes memories of travel. The following paragraphs address these various dimensions of the young people’s accounts.

The participants describe the festival as a locus that impacts on people’s interaction and point out that acquaintances meet and talk without having made arrangements to meet. Others mention meeting ‘others we don’t know from before’, ‘new people’ and ‘interesting people’. One girl highlighted that

she has seen strangers talking together without looking at the color of their skin. Another said that the first thing she noticed was 'how happy and open people are, which is good to see, especially when there are so many different types of cultures'. These reflections are indicative of imaginaries that oppose discourses where race, skin color, and culture are made into problematic issues. The festival is construed as a color blind, tolerant, and, thus, an ideal space. When the young people are so explicit in their descriptions of how the festival enables different people to interact and talk together, there is a clear, underlying assumption that people are not necessarily happy and open when meeting cultures different from their own, and that it might be difficult to communicate across cultural differences (see Hall 1959; Hofstede 1989; Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel 2007). An important aspect of the answers the young participants give is that they describe the encounters with difference at the festival as instances that affirm the value of diversity, and they describe this diversity as being in place (Cresswell 1992). The young people's answers indicate that the annual festival has become a place where the positive outlook on diversity is different from the problem-oriented focus on diversity in society at large.

For many of the participants, the festival is not only a recurring, out-of-the-ordinary event in their hometown, but also a place they revisit every year as they grow up. Some describe it as a 'tradition'. In the informal conversations outside the camper, many young participants told us how the festival had become an important part of their childhood in Hamar. As teenagers, they described how it felt to visit a place that appeared to be unchanged, while they themselves had grown. Some felt the festival was a bit childish for them now, whereas for others it provided a space where they were allowed to be children again. Several of the young people interviewed emphasized the freedom they remember from being children and roaming around at the festival. A boy explained how he and his friend 'went everywhere, trying out absolutely everything', indicating that the festival was perceived as a safe space for exploration. Memories of bodily experiences, such as seeing their hands decorated with henna patterns and having their hair braided with sea shells were mentioned by several of the girls. For them, cultural practices that may otherwise be construed as exotic and foreign in the town of Hamar, had become childhood memories of freedom of movement, a search for new experiences and the sensation of having henna painted on their own skin. Taken in isolation, the henna painting and hair braiding can be interpreted as an iteration of cultural appropriation (Matthes 2016), as a superficial encounter allowing majority children to dress up as 'the other'. However, the memory can also be read as reflecting an act of intercultural learning, allowing children to recognize and better understand the patterns they will later see on the hands of people on their way to celebrations. From a citizenship perspective, the most important aspect might be that the acts of henna painting and hair braiding extend the notion of how 'we' can dress

up, in that it accommodates for diversity within the togetherness experienced at the festival.

For others, particular elements within the festival space itself recalled memories, such as for this girl (aged 12) who is reminded of:

My home country [Eritrea]. Well, it makes me happy to be here, I'm happy to be able to be here and it evokes memories and I feel at home in a way when I can sort of see Eritrean dresses and food, and so on, yes, then I feel as if I'm back in my home country. [Whispers:] It is so comfortable here, I'll take off my shoes. Good bye!

This girl lived in Norway, but referred to Eritrea as her home country or country of origin. We do not know whether she has ever lived there because it is not uncommon among minority youth to refer to their parents' country of origin as their home country (Erstad et al. 2016; Laursen and Mogensen 2016). Despite the increasing number of people living transnational lives, the nation state has a paramount status as the site of belonging. However, within the festival space where many different nation states and regions are represented, the girl 'feel[s] at home'. She connected this feeling of being home to the diversity of food and dresses as a source of sameness, but it might also be that the festival space's disruption of the Norway/other binary was conducive to this feeling. Her final expression of feeling at home is indicative of this, where she finds the festival 'so comfortable' that she takes off her shoes before she leaves the camper and continues wandering. In this way, she enacts a performative citizenship (Isin 2017) that positions her as an insider, a member, and an active participant in her community (Stokke 2017; Pratt 2012). Seeing oneself as a member of a community presupposes that there is no aspect of one's identity that is perceived as incompatible with membership. At the festival, the girl's self-identification as Eritrean does not stand in the way of feeling at home.

The childhood memories of others also appear to have a transnational dimension. One girl explained how the festival evoked memories relating to her relationship with her mother who is from Peru. Others also mentioned family members who were born in a different country, such as this young person: 'my uncle is from Columbia and talks about it all the time'. In this festival space, diversity is in place (Cresswell 1992) and transnational ties are made relevant. The festival is described as a space that brings people together. Many mentioned the importance of being with family and friends at the festival, and that being together in this space brought out particular dimensions of their relationships. As one girl put it: 'My memories are from when I was here last year with some friends, some of the same ones I am here with this year'. Another girl said: 'It was very nice. I recall that we were together with the whole family'. In other words, irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds, young people draw attention to family belonging and family togetherness as a part of what they think about when being at the festival. As the example with the Eritrean girl

shows, the festival also opens up a space for people with foreign backgrounds on the inside of community and not at the margins.

However, the many memories of travel and the widespread travel metaphor indicate an ambiguity in the participants' perception of diversity and togetherness at the festival. Travel is characterized by encountering difference where it is in place and hence expected. As a phenomenon, travel does not necessarily impact on how people connect diversity and togetherness within their local everyday lives. Exploring and discovering the Other may add some spice to the dreariness of the everyday (Hooks 1992), while leaving the conceptualized boundaries of citizenship unchanged. On the other hand, the travel metaphor also opens up space for connotations, such as movement, process, and activity. The notion of citizenship as participation accentuates that 'active citizenship has an integrative function in the sense that it draws people out of the private sphere and into the public sphere' (Stokke 2017, 196). For some young people, their associations with travel also spur reflections about the differences between tourism and forced migration, as explained by one participant who said: 'It reminds me of the refugee crisis, and to see Afghanistan, for example, which is a land destroyed by war'. Such statements are compatible with upholding a notion of citizenship that corresponds to the nation state, but can also be indicative of a more transnational conceptualization of citizenship, where rights and duties are extended to fellow human beings beyond the boundaries of the nation state (Pratt 2012; Stokke 2017; MacGregor, 2014).

In sum, during the app-interviews, the young people engage with discourses of citizenship as membership and citizenship as participation by bringing in the themes of belonging, togetherness and travel. They also describe the festival space as an inclusive space which includes ethnic groups that are often marginalized in society. This stand implicitly criticizes being dismissive of people from other backgrounds, thus redrawing the boundaries between the insiders and outsiders of a community (Stokke 2017). The participants describe how transnational identities are perceived to be in place at the festival, and how this brings out a sense of safety and belonging. Their understanding of citizenship as participation emphasizes the importance of becoming a citizen of a community through active participation.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this article, we have explored what it is that characterizes young people's experiences and meaning-making while attending an annual multicultural festival in a municipality in Norway. The festival's celebration of diversity, its promotion of inclusion, and its unequivocal stance against xenophobia distance it from the problem-oriented premises of many current debates on migration and diversity. In our app-interviews with young festival participants about what they have done and the memories their participation evokes, we find a broad



spectrum of reflections that can be organized into two broad categories of 'learning about diversity' and 'being a citizen'.

Young people express a strong learning discourse, making sense of their festival participation as a learning experience, where they acquire new knowledge about countries, cultures, and traditions. In addition, they also describe their sense of togetherness, feeling at home and the joy of exploring unknown places, which underlines the value of learning about the unfamiliar and getting to know 'the other' at the festival. We would argue that there is a potential for education in facilitating young people's meta-perspective on learning, going beyond rather narrow conceptualizations of learning, to also include these more experiential elements.

The young participants describe the festival as a safe space for exploration and an inclusive space, where different people meet, talk, and interact. Many of them have visited the festival every year since they were small children, and have memories of roaming around, of sitting still, and having their hair braided or their hands painted with elaborate henna patterns. They talk about the pleasure of tasting foreign food and the sense of togetherness, and being with family and friends, but not about countering racism, discrimination, or migration policies. In this article, we have argued that the absence of an explicit political discourse does not make the young people's meaning-making unimportant. The sense of diversity in togetherness and their positive impressions of intercultural learning makes their experience compatible with citizenship. For those who often feel that their transnational identities and stories of migration set them apart from the collective 'we', this festival setting appears to open up space for a performative citizenship where such aspects of one's identity do not contradict a sense of belonging together with everybody else.

We do not know whether these experiences in the lives of children and young people will impact on their conceptualizations of citizenship and inclusion in their future lives as adults. However, from their reflections in the interviews and the stories they shared with us, we know that they take with them memories of togetherness and of the diversity of cultures as a source of learning. Such experiences and memories may contribute to making diversity in togetherness appear as a norm rather than as an exception.

## Note

1. The app was developed in collaboration with EngageLab, a scientific unit at the University of Oslo and consists of ICT developers, designers, and researchers.

## Disclosure statement

We confirm that no financial interest or benefit has arisen from the direct application of our research.

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