

Leaving Boys Behind?

The Gender Gap in Education among Children and Young People from Foreign Backgrounds 2010–2020

A Nordic Review



Nordic Council
of Ministers



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Terminology

Fact Box 1

In this report, youths are divided into three different groups:

Native-born with at least one native-born parent

Descendant: native-born with two foreign-born parents

Foreign-born with two foreign-born parents

Fact box 2

Definitions for childcare and education used in the text

Childcare: a collective term for family day care and preschool activities.

Preschool: early childhood education as a whole, usually for children aged 1–6 years, until they start primary school. The definition is common in Nordic countries and comparing with international definitions includes both Nursery (for children aged 6 weeks to 3–5 years) and Preschool (in the meaning early childhood education and care for children aged 3–5 to 6 years)

Primary school: a mandatory school that starts at the age 6–7 years

(Lower) Secondary school: a mandatory school that starts at the age 12–13 years

Upper Secondary education: starts around the age 15–16 years

Vocational education: training in skills and teaching of knowledge related to a specific trade, occupation or vocation, part of secondary or tertiary education, starts around age 15–16 years

Tertiary education or **Higher education:** post-secondary education that starts from the age 18 and has no upper limit

Foreword

In recent decades, immigration has significantly changed the demographic composition of the Nordic region. Integrating new citizens is high on the political agenda and a key priority for the Nordic Council of Ministers. Our [Vision 2030](#) of a competitive and socially sustainable Nordic region calls for increased labour market participation and various measures to ensure that refugees and immigrants can become active members of the Nordic societies. Education is a key factor in helping immigrants find their place and path and achieve their full potential.

Some integration policies have, however, had different outcomes for different groups. Gender would appear to play an important role in educational performance. In many countries, we can identify a clear trend that boys are increasingly experiencing difficulties in school. They achieve lower grades than girls, have poorer reading skills, have higher dropout rates and are less likely to continue to higher-level education. This gender gap can be identified both among native-born and people from foreign backgrounds. Are we leaving boys behind?

The aim of this study is to find out what the situation looks like in the Nordic welfare states – societies that historically strive for equal education opportunities for all. The report reviews previous and current research on the gender gap in education in the Nordic Region, with a particular focus on boys from foreign backgrounds.

The results are unequivocal. A gender gap in education exists and is growing in all the Nordic countries. As highly skilled and educated workers of both genders are a necessity in an advanced economy, this may cause problems in the long term. There is a distinct possibility that many boys will fall behind, and if this process continues, they will be at a greater risk of marginalisation.

This report also explores the policies and measures to help boys and investigates whether these have been successful. We learn, for example, that early language training is particularly crucial for boys.

At the same time, we see that many girls from foreign backgrounds enjoy considerable success in school in the Nordic countries. Studies show that descendant and foreign-born girls frequently outperform native-born boys. This raises several questions about the mechanisms of integration. What can be learned from these girls?

We hope that this report will encourage more in-depth research in this important field and persuade the Nordic countries to learn from each other's experiences, to create solutions that will give all children, regardless of gender, the best possible opportunities in education and for their futures.

This study is part of the Nordic Co-operation Programme on Integration and Inclusion, a collaboration between the Nordic Welfare Centre and Nordregio, initiated by the Nordic Council of Ministers. We would like to thank the authors, PhD Lovisa Broström and associated professor Birgitta Jansson, from the University of Gothenburg, for their important work.

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Summary

This report is a review of the research that discusses the discernible gender gap in education in the Nordic countries, with a special focus on girls and boys from foreign backgrounds. Girls generally perform better in the Nordic school system than boys. We will explore recent research that outlines some of the similarities and differences of this phenomenon in the Nordic countries. We will also examine measures put in place to help children from foreign backgrounds, especially boys, perform better in school. One of our objectives is to identify what lessons the Nordic countries can learn about the gender gap from the respective setbacks and positive advances.

This review reveals a well-defined and recurring pattern across the Nordic region, despite noticeable national differences in migration histories: Girls perform consistently better in compulsory schooling and upper-secondary education than boys. They also have greater aspirations to continue to higher education than boys and are more likely to do so.

The evidence suggests that girls with a Nordic background have the highest educational outcomes of all groups. Following them, we generally find boys with Nordic backgrounds – but we have discovered that the overall picture is slightly more complex. In many studies, the results show that descendant and foreign-born girls outperform native-born boys. Among the boys, those with foreign backgrounds often struggle the most in school. At the same time, the results confirm the success that many girls with foreign backgrounds have in education in the Nordic countries.

The conclusion is that we are witness to a complex situation in which gender and national origin are entangled, and that a predictable outcome is not a given. The evidence that gender often eclipses national origin is a key takeaway from the debate on the integration of immigrants.

There are many varied explanations as to why boys, in general, perform less well in school than girls. Previous research has emphasised that the temporary teaching style with more personal responsibility for the students and less learning through listening and following directions, benefits girls. It is sometimes claimed that studying hard has developed into something of a female trait. While boys, in general, have greater self-confidence, this is not reflected in grades or school performance (Zimmerman 2019).

Language proficiency has been a central focus in many studies of this dichotomy. The research is unequivocal: the longer a child has lived in a country the better their achievement in the school system will be. Language training in the local language from an early age is a cornerstone of participation in the education “the temporary teaching style” system on all levels. Previous research has shown that it is important to focus on early language training for boys. When measures and policies have been taken to separate children with foreign backgrounds from their peers in the broader population, this often inhibits their ability to learn the language. Boys, especially, benefit from participation in preschool activities with well-trained preschool teachers. Integrating children from all socioeconomic groups in the mandatory school system, while preventing segregation presents unique challenges.

This report also examines different policies and projects that have been implemented to address some of these issues. We ask: What has been done, particularly in the area of language proficiency, to help children from foreign backgrounds perform better?

The key findings are:

- Child-care allowance has led to many children remaining in the home, without learning the local language. Consequently, they lack language proficiency making it harder to cope in compulsory schooling. Learning the local language from an early age seems to be a particularly important factor for boys' educational development.
- A lack of proficiency in your first language greatly impedes the possibilities to learn a second one. Dropping classes in students' first languages from the curriculum has negative consequences for language development and subsequent educational achievement.
- Over-optimistic expectations sometimes lead to students dropping out from education. Striking a balance between aspirations and capabilities is the key.
- Understanding the cultural background of both children and families from another part of the world is vital for teachers and schools. Similarly, families and children need to understand to a greater degree what is expected of them in a school environment.

Introduction

Over recent decades, the demographic composition of the Nordic countries has changed. Each Nordic country has seen increasing numbers of migrants and refugees, especially among the younger age groups. Creating future paths and educational possibilities for this group is a core concern and subject of much debate. Education is considered one of the most important ways of fostering inclusion in society, providing new opportunities for the individual and facilitating integration.

However, the education system has proven to provide dissimilar outcomes for different people. There is a pronounced difference in labour market integration and education between men and women. Among those who immigrate as adults, men are more likely to be employed than women. In the following generation a reversal seems to occur. Taking those who immigrated at a very young age or were born in the Nordic countries to immigrant parents as a group, there is persuasive evidence that girls perform more strongly in school and the labour market than boys, regardless of national origin. As the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) surveys states: “[...] we see that foreign-born girls on average perform somewhat better than Swedish-born boys” (SOU 2009: 64). Research in Denmark has shown that in relation to all descendants, descendant girls from non-Western countries outperform their counterparts in accessing higher education (Clante 2021).

It is important to note that the gap in educational performance between girls and boys exists regardless of nationality. Girls are, in general, more likely to complete an upper-secondary education and enter higher education than boys. In 2019, girls in Sweden were more likely to graduate from upper-secondary school with basic university eligibility than boys, 80.8% compared with 66.4% (Nejman 2020).

For children with foreign backgrounds, research shows that social heritage or the geographical area in which they grew up has different significance for girls and boys. Growing up in a socio-economically weak area affects boys more than girls. “In all groups with a foreign background, except those from the Horn of Africa, women are about twice as likely to be highly educated as men” (Katz & Österberg 2020, p. 56). Boys with a non-European background are overrepresented among those who drop out from upper-secondary school and more often receive social support.

The main aim of this study is to collate knowledge on the educational gap between girls and boys in the Nordic countries. We focus on young immigrants; both those who came to the Nordic countries as children, and those whose parents have immigrated, and compare them with girls and boys from native-born families.

In this report, youths were divided into three different groups:

- Native-born with one or two native-born parents
- Descendant – native-born with two foreign-born parents (there is a noticeable difference in levels of integration and language proficiency if one parent is native-born)
- Foreign born with foreign-born parents

This report is a review of previous research on integration and education in the Nordic countries. We investigate whether the educational gap exists in all the Nordic countries, if it is a common problem, and how it is addressed. In this overview, we have included what we consider to be the most important research results from recent decades. We have included different categories of research on girls and boys, young male and females, foreign-born, descendants and native-born with native born parents in the Nordic countries from 2010 to 2020. As with all reviews, the previous research we refer to differs according to which of the three groups is in focus and what issue is being addressed. As far as possible, we have tried to aggregate research into different life stages, from early-childhood and preschool up to higher education.

The Nordic countries have experienced disparate migration patterns. Sweden, Denmark, and Norway have had longer periods of immigration than Finland and Iceland and therefore the descendant group is absent in many studies from these two countries, whereas numerous studies including this group are available from Sweden and Denmark. We have tried to clearly distinguish the issues researched and the countries involved.

The aim of this report is to

- investigate differences and similarities between the Nordic countries
- explore if and how the Nordic countries have observed and addressed the gender gap in education
- discuss what the Nordic countries can learn from each other.

The report ends by providing a snapshot of the situation in the labour market for young adults and how this differs between men and women from foreign backgrounds.

Setting the scene

The Nordic countries have different demographic compositions, and immigrants account for a growing proportion of the Nordic population. In 2019, the age group in focus in this report (0 to 24 years old) from foreign backgrounds represented 6.2% of the population in Denmark, 4.2% in Finland, 8.5% in Norway, 11.9% in Sweden and 7.8% in Iceland (Table 1). However, the migrant population in Iceland is small in actual terms and research on this group has only recently begun. During the last 10 years (particularly in 2015) there has been a significant influx of primarily male migrants to the Nordic countries. Special measures were put in place to help these refugees, a significant group of whom were unaccompanied young males.

In this report, we focus on the three groups presented in Table 1 and observe differences and similarities between girls and boys across the Nordic countries with regard to their level of education, educational orientation and grade attainment. The studied group consists of children to young adults (aged 0–24) and is further divided into three subgroups: foreign-born, descendants and native-born (which in this study refers to native-born with at least one native-born parent). In Table 1, the three subgroups are shown as a percentage of the population for each of the Nordic countries.

		Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Foreign-born with two foreign-born parents	Male	3.1	2.2	4.0	4.5	6.5
	Female	3.1	2.0	3.8	4.0	5.4
	Total	6.2	4.2	7.8	8.5	11.9
Descendant – Native-born with two foreign-born parents	Male	4.2	2.2	2.2	5.0	6.7
	Female	4.1	2.1	2.1	4.7	6.4
	Total	8.3	4.3	4.3	9.7	13.1
Native-born with native-born parent(s)	Male	43.9	46.8	45.0	42.0	38.5
	Female	41.7	44.7	42.9	39.8	36.4
	Total	85.5	91.6	87.9	81.8	75.0

Table 1. Population 0–24-year-olds according to migration status and gender 2019 in %

Source: Nordic Statistics database.

In Table 1, the division by gender is shown for the age group 0–24 years. As can be seen from the table, Sweden has the largest share of both foreign-born (11.9%) and descendants (13.1%) and Finland the smallest, a consequence of differences in previous migration policies and history. There are more boys in migrant groups than girls, but this difference between male and female is also found in the native-born group in all the Nordic countries. There are approximately 2 percentage points more males among the native-born grouping, an understandable difference as more boys

are born than girls, in general.

Education in the Nordic countries is free for all natural citizens and those with residence permits. School systems in the Nordic Region are broadly similar and start with compulsory preschool followed by compulsory primary and lower-secondary school. Upper-secondary (although not compulsory) and tertiary education are also free, and state provided educational grants make it possible for all students to enter higher education if so desired. Table 2 shows similarities and differences between each country's education systems and specific educational measures applied, based on a study by Kulbrandstad et al. (2018), which examined the most recent educational steering documents available.

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Students considered to have special needs?	PS: Yes CS: Yes USS: Limited	PS: No CS: Yes USS: Yes	PS: No CS: Yes USS: Yes	PS: Yes CS: Yes USS: Yes	PS: Yes CS: Yes USS: Yes
Home language and culture in place in care and schooling?	PS: No CS: Limited USS: No	PS: No CS: If possible USS: If possible	PS: No CS: Yes USS: If possible	PS: Yes CS: If needed USS: If needed	PS: Yes CS: Yes USS: Yes
If yes, is home language and culture in place as a school subject in its own right, or as an instrument for other subjects?	PS: - CS: Instrumental USS: -	PS: - CS: Own right USS: Own right	PS: - CS: Own right USS: Own right	PS: Own right CS: Instrumental USS: Instrumental	PS: Own right CS: Own right USS: Own right
Majority or official language stimulation or tuition?	PS: Yes CS: Yes USS: No	PS: No CS: Yes USS: Yes	PS: No CS: Yes USS: Yes	PS: Yes CS: Limited USS: Limited	PS: Yes CS: Yes USS: Yes
Majority or official language as an ordinary subject?	PS: - CS: Yes USS: No	PS: - CS: Yes USS: Yes	PS: - CS: Yes USS: Yes	PS: - CS: No USS: No	PS: - CS: Yes USS: Yes

Table 2. Summative analysis of particular educational measures for children and students with foreign backgrounds

Sources: Kulbrandstad et al. (2018), page 57 Tables 2-6. PS = Preschool, CS = Compulsory School, USS = Upper-secondary school.

Kulbrandstad et al. (2018) conclude that the components outlined in the Nordic education systems above reflect broader controversies and political trends surrounding immigration and integration in those countries in recent years. The fact that Denmark and Sweden are at opposite ends of the table mirrors the general differences in immigration and integration policies between the two countries since the early 1990s. Danish immigration policy has focussed on assimilation and as a result, first language education for immigrants in Danish preschools and schools has disappeared from the curriculum. We will return to the importance of first language education for children later in this report.

Arriving in a country later in life can be extremely challenging when it comes to mastering a language. As previously noted, it is widely recognised that the earlier a child arrives in a country the greater their chances of finishing upper-secondary education become, mainly due to language proficiency. Many migrants arrive in their teens and require considerable language tuition or a fundamental language introduction as a result. Finland and Sweden have developed curricula that include the new native language as a second language. In Finland, this is available on an assessed needs basis to students whose native language is not Swedish or Finnish. In Sweden, this option is also available to a wider group of students but similarly provided on an assessed needs basis. This choice on the curriculum is available to students throughout their school education in both countries.

The boy crisis

The focus of gender equality studies has for a long time centred on the unequal situation for women with respect to education, income and family life. Policies have been implemented to reduce gender discrimination (Lister 2009). Previous research highlighting the situation for girls in school and pedagogy has focussed on how to encourage 'silent girls', (e.g. Gallas 1997). By focussing solely on girls, however, boys have often been overlooked in many studies and their problems have been neglected. Boys are frequently described as dominating teachers' attention and simply by virtue of being boys, are considered the winners in a classroom setting. The more general inference is that they will, nonetheless, get a good job in the future, despite an overall weaker performance in school.

Over recent decades, boys' performance in school has been gradually deteriorating in comparison to that of girls. This is a global trend, often referred to as 'The Boy Crisis' (Farell & Grey 2018). According to proponents of this theory, boys' previously dominant position in the classroom has faded. Boys, and by extension men, experience a sense of loss in relation to their role in modern society and formerly solidly entrenched gender roles and expectations have dissolved. There is a clear pattern in the OECD-countries that girls perform better in school and that boys today fall behind girls' educational performance. This is commonly linked to the issue of an educational crisis that mainly affects boys.

Another aspect of the boy crisis can be seen in the labour market. The demand for a highly educated workforce is increasing, while the share of manual labour has decreased. This may make it more difficult for males to keep up with females in higher education and labour market outcomes, since females, frequently achieve higher grades and are more qualified. This has been described as the ongoing pauperisation of men (Broström & Rauhut 2018; Jansson & Broström 2020).

In the Nordic countries, the extent of the boy crisis is striking. Three Nordic countries can be found on the PISA top-five list 2020 of countries with the largest gender gap in performance, with Norway, Finland and Iceland placed just behind Israel. In Sweden, descendant girls perform better in reading than native born boys. In all the Nordic countries, females are more likely to attend higher education and have a tertiary exam than males. This trend has increased noticeably over recent decades. Considerably more women now enter traditional male arenas such as engineering or law than men enter traditional female education areas like nursing or social work.

The gaps in education achievement between males and females are presented in Figure 1 below, which shows percentage of completed upper secondary school by age 25, divided by origin. As can be seen, females outperform males in all groups.

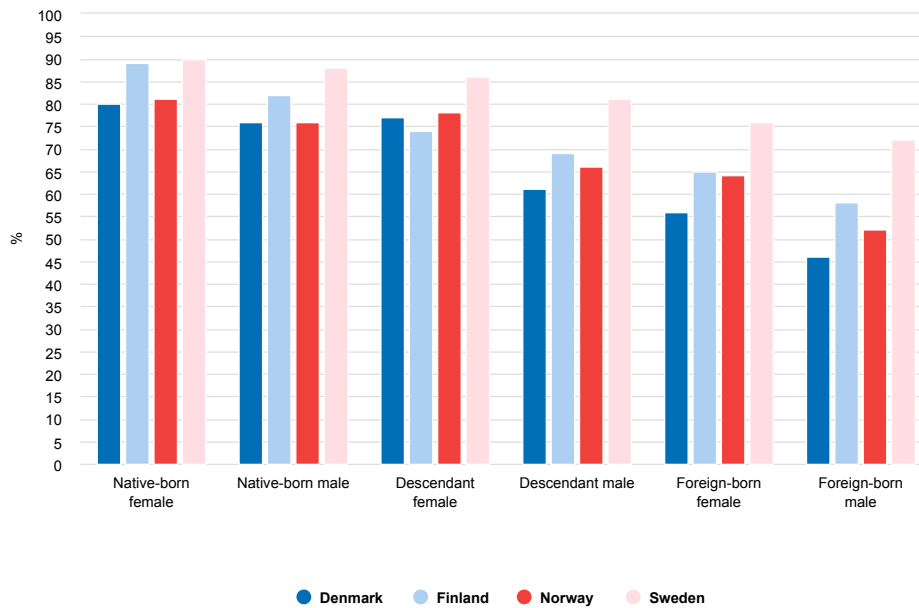


Figure 1. Completed upper secondary education by age 25. Percentage.

Source: Dunlavy et al. (2020). Own calculations based on Appendix Table 6a.

There are different explanations and hypotheses for why boys perform worse overall in school than girls. The following are some of the main hypotheses that have been suggested:

- An 'anti-study culture' exist among boys in many parts of the world. Boys simply do not make an effort in school. Performing well in school has developed to a position that stands in opposition to more conservative views on masculinity (Jonsson 2014).
- The return on investment in study is usually higher for girls. Boys have previously been able to gain employment with relatively high wages more easily than girls. For girls, education has functioned as a springboard to a better income in the future (Autor & Wasserman (2013).
- Girls develop language skills earlier than boys and have stronger focus and language proficiency as a result.
- It has also been suggested that a greater prevalence of female teachers has contributed to boys receiving lower grades because boys are seen as disruptive in classroom settings, and do not conform to educational norms the same way as girls. This affects how teachers view the boys and their educational performance (Quazada & Page 2013).

These factors may play an important role in understanding why boys are doing worse in school. Although elaborating all these issues is beyond the scope of this paper, they should be taken into consideration when discussing the results of this study.

Early childhood and preschool

The first educational institution that parents encounter in the Nordic countries is often the preschool system. Especially during a child's early years, the interplay between family and preschool is important to the child's development. Family size, household overcrowding and the psychological state and employment status of parents are all important factors to consider. However, the focus here is on the function of preschools. The school systems in the Nordic countries aim to compensate for differences in parents' socioeconomic and educational status thus affording every child the same chance to develop according to their own ability. When high-quality universal childcare is offered by the public sector, it can have an equalising role in society (Esping Andersen 2011).

Preschools have proven to be a positive sphere for language training and developing social skills and are especially important for migrant and descendant children since this is often their only encounter with the native language (Løberg 2021). Research has shown that boys generally have less language practice at home (Tegunimataka 2021) and therefore it is important for them to attend preschools. From this perspective, what have the Nordic countries done to improve the situation for migrant and descendant children?

Compulsory preschool begins at age five in Norway and Sweden and at age six in Denmark, Finland and Iceland. All the Nordic countries offer public and private preschools to children from age one whose parents are employed or in education. The great majority of all children attend preschool, starting at a young age.

However, there is a marked difference between the participation rates of immigrant and native-born children in preschools, where immigrant-born children participate to a much lesser extent. The type of care and education a small child receives is crucial for their development in later life. A child's personality traits and behavioural patterns develop in a continuous interplay between biological and psychosocial conditions and their immediate physical environment. Recent research shows that children who do not attend preschool have less well developed language skills and encounter greater problems adapting to compulsory pre- and primary school (Roulstone et al. 2010).

The core question here revolves around how much influence the state should have, and to what extent decisions over who is best suited to caring for a young child should be left to individual families. Is it better for a child to be raised by their parents or in a preschool with professional teachers? The answer to this question varies widely according to tradition and ideology.

One previously widespread childcare policy in all the Nordic countries, is the childcare allowance system for parents of small children (under the age of three). The aim of this policy was to increase the freedom for parents to choose the kind of childcare they preferred and felt best suited their needs. It allowed one parent to stay at home with their child in return for a modest reimbursement. Legislation differed across the countries, but it normally required that the child not attend a municipally provided public or private preschool.

In 1998, Norway introduced a child-care allowance (Kontantstøtte). The outcome of the Norwegian experience was that the child-care allowance reduced integration for children. Children's language development in immigrant families was poorer than children who attended preschool. Evaluations of the legislation showed that most of those receiving the child-care allowance were women and that it represented a step back for gender equality (Holte Hauge 2013). Today, the child-care allowance in Norway has been substantially decreased and the maximum length of provision is eleven months, for children aged 13 to 23 months.

In 2008, a similar child-care allowance (Vårnadsbidrag) was implemented in Sweden (Regeringen proposition 2008/09:139). In evaluations of this legislation, it became apparent that Sweden faced some of the same issues as Norway, primarily in areas of integration and learning the Swedish language, and that the allowance counteracted both gender equality and integration measures. Virtually all recipients were women; mostly immigrants and those in part-time work. Three-quarters of the women who received the allowance came from countries outside Europe. The child-care allowance in Sweden was abolished in 2016 (Regeringen Ds:2015:19).

In 2009, 12 of 77 municipalities in Iceland decided to introduce a child-care allowance system. Two years later, most of these benefits were removed. However, there are no comparative statistics on how the allowance was allocated, as the number of immigrant families with young children at that time was relatively low (Eydal & Rostgaard 2010; Eydal & Rostgaard 2011).

The Nordic countries seem to have shared similar experiences from the provision of these forms of child-care allowances and have reformed or abolished them for reasons of integration, instead focussing on improving immigrant mothers' access to the labour market and child language development. Finland still has a child home-care allowance although it has been the subject of much debate because of its effect on female labour market participation and consequently on gender equality. In Denmark, the individual municipalities decide the sum of the child-care allowance, which has resulted in higher payments than in the other Nordic countries.

More recently, the Nordic countries have chosen different routes for integrating children. Since 2010, Norway has altered its preschool system to focus on young children. In Norway, 90.4% of children aged 1–5 and 97.3% of all five-year-olds attended preschool in 2015. There has been a significant increase in the number of preschool places and the maximum fees for them. A legal entitlement to a place in preschool has also been introduced combined with a focus on developing the quality of and provision of preschools.

According to the *Framework Plan*, preschools in Norway must support young children in the use of their first language while also actively working to promote their Norwegian language skills. Municipalities receive an earmarked government grant aimed at enhancing integration and language development for minority-language children in preschool. There are various schemes and programmes providing free core hours in preschool. Some specific programmes are provided in designated geographical areas with high numbers of residents from immigrant backgrounds.

Results from a study by Drange and Telles (2015) show that this reform led to improved language proficiency and integration among children from migrant families. A positive effect of the preschool intervention on girls' cognitive skills was

noted, but no similar effect was found for boys (Drange & Telle 2015). This may be connected to earlier language development among girls or that adults communicate more with girls, which improves their language capacity, in all settings.

In August 2015, a national scheme was introduced, offering 20 free hours per week in a nursery school for all four- and five-year-olds from low-income families, regardless of their first language. From August 2016, three-year-olds from low-income families were included in this scheme. In addition, children in asylum centres aged two and three, from families with an approved asylum application, were entitled to free core hours in a nursery school. Norway's strategy for increasing preschool enrolment was to improve quality and accessibility (Thorudet et al. 2016).

Denmark and Sweden have encountered similar problems to those reported in Norway, with many young children from immigrant backgrounds not attending preschool but have taken different approaches to increasing participation.

In Denmark in 2018, it was decided that families who live in socially marginalised areas are legally obliged to send their children to nursery school for 25 hours per week from the age of one until school age. The intention was that the child's knowledge of the Danish language would develop and that the child would be introduced to Danish traditions and values. If parents refuse, they risk losing the social support they receive in child benefits (Witcombe 2019).

In Sweden, the participation rate in preschool among foreign-born children aged 1–2 years was 53% in 2018. This proportion increases significantly with age (82% aged 3–5 years) but is still significantly lower than for native-born children (93% aged 3–5 in 2018). Participation in preschool generally increases with the length of residence in the country. A government bill in Sweden suggests increasing participation in preschool for girls and boys aged 3–5 years, especially newly arrived children. The bill sets out an entitlement to compulsory language preschool from the age of three, with at least 15 hours a week within the framework of the regular preschool. The bill is targeted at children with a first language other than Swedish and children in socio-economically vulnerable groups (Regeringen Dir 2019:71).

Continued immigration also poses challenges to the development of inclusive early childhood education in Finland, where approximately 10.9% of children have foreign-born parents. A paper by Arvola et al. (2017) studied eleven quota-refugee families' parents, as well as teachers and head teachers, in six preschools and four compulsory schools in three municipalities. According to the findings, children benefit from multilingual approaches in school and parents benefit from more active educational partnerships with schools and the community, helping them establish a better life in Finland (Arvola et al. 2017). In another study by Lastikka and Lipponen (2016), immigrant parents were asked about their views on preschool and care praxis in the Finnish context. The results show the importance of including parents in preschool language education, thereby creating a dialogue and mutual understanding between parents and preschools. Providing support and individualised attention for a whole family was also shown to be important. Promoting cultural and linguistic diversity and encouraging co-operative partnerships is also essential.

Besides participation in preschool from a young age, another crucial aspect to a child's development is the quality of the preschool. In the Nordic countries, the challenge is not so much to increase preschool coverage but to raise the quality of

care offered to further improve child outcomes (Bente 2013). There are two main aspects discussed in this regard: the number of preschool teachers per child and the availability of trained preschool teachers. Regarding the first issue, a higher ratio of staff to children is, of course, more likely to ensure that a child's needs are met. Higher levels of education of preschool teachers and greater availability of specialists (e.g., speech therapists) also results in improved outcomes for children. The importance of early childcare, however, depends on its pedagogical quality and the quality of the home alternative. Measuring the effects of starting preschool earlier versus later is a major research field (see, e.g. Melhuish 2011, Bauchmuller et al. 2011 and Liu and Skans 2010).

The overarching result here is that young boys need more early language training to keep up with girls.

As outlined above, the child-care allowance had a negative impact on the participation level of immigrant children in preschools and may have had a negative impact on boys' introduction to the new language. This is a research area that deserves more attention. The Norwegian versus Swedish/Danish approach to increasing preschool participation and language skills also needs further research to more fully appreciate which policy route is potentially the most successful one.

Primary education

Migrating to a country in another part of the world usually implies a significant change in circumstances and brings new challenges, many often connected to language barriers. Arriving as a child under the age of seven, attending preschool and starting primary school with at least some basic knowledge of the new language, has proved better for school performance than starting primary school as a newly arrived migrant.

Previous research has shown that the age at which someone migrates has a significant impact on school performance and that a clear difference between boys and girls in this regard, exists (Dunlavy et al. 2020). Studies have found that the gap in average grades between the native-born majority and foreign-born minority is smallest for migrants who arrive before the age of seven. Children who arrived when they were younger had higher average scores than those who arrived when they were older (Dunlavy et al. 2020; Tørslev and Børsch 2020; SOU 2019:40; Montgomery 2020). When comparing grades, foreign-born and descendant girls had higher average scores than foreign-born boys and also scored better than native-born boys in Sweden and Norway (Tørslev and Børsch 2020). In Figure 2 these differences in average scores in ninth grade are presented for Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. We see that young females are performing better than young males, especially those arriving before age seven, and those with a non-refugee background.

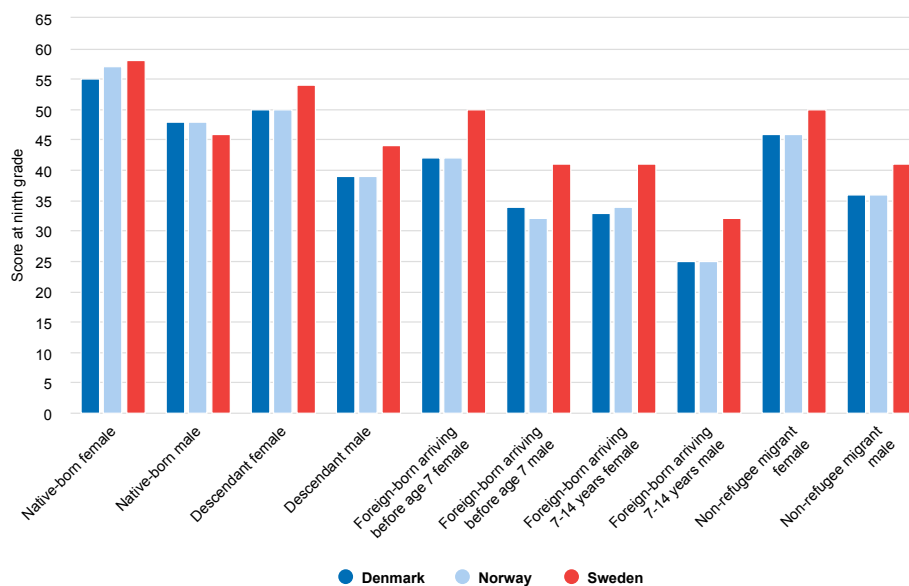


Figure 2. Average scores at ninth grade according to gender, origin and age at immigration.

Source: Dunlavy et al (2020). Own calculations based on tab 4a in appendix.¹

1. Dunlavy et al (2020) explain the method of the average score as: 'Individual grade point averages at the end of compulsory school were standardized and converted into average percentile ranked scores to enable cross-country comparisons. Students with missing information on grades were excluded from the analysis'. Note 5 page 29.

Children (and their parents) with foreign backgrounds may encounter problems adapting to a new school system. In Iceland, a country in which the proportion of migrant families recently increased, a study (Gunnþórsdóttir et al. 2019) was conducted to investigate, analyse and observe the challenges and experiences of teachers of immigrant students, and parents' experiences of Icelandic schools and their children's education. The study found that teachers were not supported in their role of understanding and managing multicultural education and that the Icelandic school system challenges foreign parents' understanding of school as a traditional place of learning. It also found a lack of collaboration and discussion between teachers and parents concerning students' needs and their parents' expectations of the school. To overcome these problems, the researchers suggest that addressing the lack of collaboration and discussion between both parties on these issues could noticeably improve the educational prospects of immigrant students.

Finland has a briefer history of immigration than Sweden, Norway and Denmark (Sinkkonen & Kyttälä 2014). The Finnish school system however, also faces challenges due to the country becoming increasingly multicultural. The number of students with different cultural and first language backgrounds is increasing. In a study focussing on the experiences of Finnish teachers working with immigrant students, interviewed teachers emphasised the importance of learning Finnish and mentioned positive language role models as a concrete example; pupils with insufficient skills in Finnish should study in the same class as native children with proficient language skills (Sinkkonen and Kyttälä 2014). Another issue the teachers identified is that immigrant pupils are often placed in special education classes due to their relatively poor language skills, which often do not represent an optimal lingual environment for them. Too many students with non-Finnish cultural backgrounds are transferred to special education, and the opportunity of being in the best possible lingual environment is lost. Instead, it was suggested that early-years teachers should ask more questions that encourage students to speak for longer periods of time, to help them practise their linguistic abilities.

The Finnish school system differs from the other Nordic systems in several ways. It has not undergone the same legislative reforms and changes as the other Nordic countries. In Finland, teaching is considered a high status profession (Sahlberg 2021). Utilising school assistants' working time and skills in various creative ways have shown to be effective methods for improving the learning and integration of multicultural students (Sinkkonen and Kyttälä 2014).

Within the school system, misunderstandings between parents and teachers can arise, due to language barriers and different educational traditions. If a parent's Finnish language abilities are limited and there is no interpreter available to assist in the communication between the school and the parents, miscommunications can easily occur. Studies have shown that because many children are quicker at learning new languages, they may end up having to help their parents communicate with authorities, etc. They become the family's personal interpreter.

In the Nordic countries, the discussion about first language training for migrant pupils is ongoing. According to research in pedagogy, it is significantly easier for a person to learn a second language if they are already proficient in their first language or if teaching is conducted in their first language (Ganuza and Hedman 2019).

Over the last decade, the position of first language training in primary schools has been challenged. It has been proposed that a more effective method for integration or assimilation involves limiting first language training in primary schools to lessons outside of normal school hours. The inference is that this does not interfere with regular education while encouraging pupils to learn the new language more rapidly and to a higher standard.

The validity of this method has been questioned in a study from Denmark (Tegunimataka 2021) that explored variations between municipalities in the implementation of a Danish educational reform in 2002/2003. The reform aimed to increase the assimilation of foreign-born children and descendants by removing first language training from schools for students from countries other than those in the EU or EES, Greenland and the Faroe Islands. It was believed that this would lead to improvements in this student group's Danish language proficiency.

A subsequent study was carried out in 2007/2008, measuring educational outcomes in terms of grades in standardised tests in the Danish language and mathematics in ninth grade. In comparing test results between students in municipalities that had implemented the reform and those that had not, it was revealed that the removal of first language training resulted in lower grades in Danish for boys and lower grades in mathematics for both boys and girls. The implementation of the reform had had the opposite result to the one intended (Kullbrandstad 2018).

Language skills are not the only important factor for school performance; social support and socioeconomic status (SES) are often used to explain both overall academic achievement and the achievement gap between students from the national majority and those from immigrant backgrounds, and between boys and girls. Findings from a Norwegian study (Ulriksen et al. 2015) demonstrated key differences in the self-reported grades and educational plans of girls and boys, and between native Norwegian and immigrant students. However, SES and social support alone did not explain this achievement gap. Ulriksen et al. (2015) argue that social support, especially from teachers, was equally important for all students' self-reported grades and educational plans, irrespective of immigration status and gender. Recognised social support from teachers among students seemed to exert a greater influence on the students' results and educational plans than other sources. This study stresses the importance and impact that engaged and supportive teachers can exert on all students' performance, whether native- or foreign-born. Schools and teachers can play an important compensatory role for the differences in socioeconomic status and education among parents.

Students with foreign-born and descendant backgrounds may experience difficulties in the school system due to a lack of support from their parents. The parents may not possess sufficient language skills or may find the school system unfamiliar. Nor does the fact that many migrant families often face difficult socio-economic situations, through unemployment or living in neighbourhoods with high levels of attendant social issues, contribute to a positive learning environment. Many migrant families and households are larger than native ones, and in an overcrowded home, where children lack a separate room for homework for instance, school results may suffer (Andersson et al. 2010; Kennedy 2019).

A study from Norway (Kirkeberg et al. 2019) has shown that in comparing school

performance between students from native-born and descendant backgrounds, the latter group typically received lower grades. When divided by gender, we find the same discrepancy between girls and boys in the other Nordic countries: girls perform better than boys overall. Native-born girls, descendant girls and foreign-born girls who immigrated to Norway before the age of five, have higher grades than native-born boys when finishing lower-secondary school (Kirkeberg et al. 2019).

Finland has consistently presented some of the best educational performance outcomes (PISA) of the OECD-countries (Dunlavy et al. 2020). Finland has had a relatively homogeneous population with few immigrants, and the greater part of those come from neighbouring countries such as Estonia, Poland and Russia. During recent years however, Finland has received a large number of refugees from countries such as Syria and Afghanistan, who may face greater difficulties integrating into the Finnish school system than previous migrants, owing to greater cultural and language differences.

An interesting feature noted by Sahlberg (2021) is that the performance differences between Finnish schools are small. This could be interpreted as the differences in socioeconomic status not playing the same role in students' performance as in other countries. Is the Finnish school system organised in such a way that it can provide an education that includes all students and compensates for parents' educational background and socioeconomic status? According to Sahlberg (2021), the Finnish education system, which differs from those of other countries in many ways, may be a factor here. Finnish educational policies since the 1970s have aimed at providing quality schooling for all children rather than achieving high ranking in international tables. Almost half of 16-year-old Finnish students have had some sort of personalised help or individual guidance during their time in school, based on most students in normal mainstream schools.

In recent decades the Finnish school system has moved towards the other Nordic countries in relation to a more student-centric teaching approach. The results, especially in mathematics, have seen Finland falling in ranking in the PISA surveys. Other research has observed an increasing inequality and segregation in the Finnish schools (Kosunen et. al. 2020).

At the other end of the spectrum, we find the Swedish school system, which has undergone several reforms during recent decades. Sweden transferred responsibility for schools from the state to the municipalities in the 1990's. Sweden is now the only country in the world that allows independent schools to be run for profit without imposing restrictions on them, which is one reason why the number of independent schools in the country has increased. In addition, greater segregation in the housing sector has led to a situation in which students from different social backgrounds live in different areas and therefore no longer attend the same schools.

The resulting growing and unintentional segregation in the Swedish school system has led to noticeable performance differences between schools and no longer compensates for parents' educational background and socioeconomic status (the opposite of what we have seen in Finland). This development has been described in several reports from the Swedish National Agency for Education, and also in the Government's official research (Skolverket 2018a; Skolverket 2018b; SOU 2020:28).

An interesting factor we have come across during our mapping of the education

systems is students' aspirations after graduating from lower-secondary and upper-secondary school. High aspirations were found among students with non-European backgrounds and students with higher parental occupational status (Plenty and Jonsson 2021). Results show that while many immigrant families have greater parental aspirations and offer encouragement, family cohesion and parental monitoring, only parental aspirations as a factor mediated the effects of family background.

Upper-secondary education

Upper-secondary education is often described as a watershed when it comes to future education and labour market outcomes. Completing upper-secondary education has proven to lead to improved employment possibilities and is a requirement when applying for tertiary education. Previous research has shown that the chances of a foreign-born youth completing upper-secondary school is dependent on the age at which they immigrated. Students who immigrated before age seven on average attain considerably higher grades than students who immigrated after the age of seven (SOU 2019:40; Montgomery 2020). The younger a person immigrated, the higher their grades, especially for females.

In the following studies reviewed below, age at immigration is not a variable and therefore we cannot judge if the results are comparable or not. Instead, these studies focus on how long students have been living in a country, and some employ two variables: nine years or less, and 10 years or more. As most students graduate from upper-secondary school at the age of 18 or 19, if they have been living in the country for ten years or more they would have been no older than eight or nine on arrival.

The percentage of native-born students in Norway in 2019 who completed upper-secondary school within five years was 82% for females and 73% for males. The percentage among descendants is 81% for females and 67% for males and among foreign-born students the percentage is 76% for females and 49% for males (Norwegian Education Mirror 2019). A quick glance at these figures reveals that coming from a migrant background has a negative effect on grades. When comparing the figures divided by gender, another conclusion can also be drawn; that descendant females sometimes outperform native-born males in educational outcomes.

The situation in Denmark is similar: 78% of children born in Denmark complete upper-secondary education before the age of 25. In comparison, only 24–65% of foreign-born children do likewise and this depends on their age on arrival.

Studies from Sweden show similar results. The proportion of native-born students who complete upper-secondary school with a degree or diploma within 5 years is 86% for girls and 84% for boys. The corresponding figures for non-European-born students who have lived in Sweden for at least 10 years are 79 and 77% respectively. For non-European-born students who have lived in Sweden for 9 years or less, the completion rate is lower, with 42% of girls and 39% of boys completing upper-secondary school within 5 years (SCB 2019). The difference in results presented in these studies has also increased in recent years, mainly because foreign-born students on average perform less well than before, not because domestic-born students perform significantly better (Grönqvist and Niknami 2020). These studies show that the duration of residence in a country has a very significant impact on educational outcomes.

Finland and Iceland, which have a lower share of migrants than Sweden, Norway and Denmark, have experienced the same issues. Foreign-born youths have lower

grades and a higher dropout rate from upper-secondary education than native-born youths. Age at migration matters, as a newly reported study from Iceland shows.

In Iceland, the completion rate (i.e. the proportion of new entrants who graduate) of all new entrants in autumn 2015 was 60%, four years after entering. Among immigrants who moved to Iceland before the age of seven, the rate was 58%, and for descendants the rate was 50% (Statistics Iceland 2020). The completion rate four years after entry for students who immigrated after the age of seven was 32%, compared with 62% for native-born. In autumn 2015, 320 foreign-born students entered day courses at upper-secondary level for the first time; four years later, almost 36% of these entrants had graduated. Although the real number of immigrant children in Iceland is small (320 individuals), the findings can be seen as indicative of a trend. The highest rate of graduation was found among students born abroad but with parents born in Iceland, 74% of whom graduated in 2019 compared with 62% of native-born and 55% of descendants. In terms of the gender difference, the study found that 68% of female entrants and 51% of male entrants graduated within four years.

The same overall results can be observed in Finland, where non-Finnish youths tend to have a higher likelihood of dropping out of upper-secondary education than the rest of the population. The differences between genders also persist, affecting both young people's educational paths and their opportunities in the labour market. In many OECD countries, boys have to repeat classes more often than girls, perform less well in literacy assessments and are less likely to enter upper-secondary school than girls (OECD 2021).

The studies above illustrate several changes within Nordic societies that must be addressed. During recent years, the number of young foreign-born children has increased substantially in the Nordic countries. The pattern is clear-cut; foreign-born youths, especially males, are generally less likely to finish upper-secondary education.

However, although there are many similarities between the Nordic Countries, there are also some notable differences. The research has found that children with foreign backgrounds in Sweden do better in school compared with their counterparts in other Nordic countries. According to the study *Equity in Education*, Sweden has a stronger system to support integration, including learning the Swedish language from a very early age (Dunlavy et al. 2020). However, the study also indicates that Sweden has a higher proportion of segregated schools where very few or none of the students are native-born.

Immigrants' optimism

What kind of programmes do students choose to study in upper-secondary school? In many high-income countries, researchers have documented immigrant optimism, i.e., the tendency for students from an immigrant-background to choose academically more demanding routes than others at a similar grade point average (GPA). For some researchers, this indicates structural integration, while others caution against an immigrant optimism trap, where ambition overshadows ability, leading to a greater risk of non-completion in education (Dollmann 2018). Research shows that children of immigrants tend to be more likely to drop out of education than native-born.

This immigrant optimism has been observed in all the Nordic countries. In Denmark, far fewer migrant students than Danes choose a vocational education in upper-secondary school. Although this high level of ambition can be seen as a positive attribute, the lower achievement level with which these students enter upper-secondary schools highlights their need for additional support.

An important area for future research could therefore be completion rates in upper-secondary education, focusing on students who enter with relatively low grades.

One possible solution, in an article on Finland, suggests encouraging immigrant students to choose vocational avenues to avoid the problem of dropout among this cohort. The apparent aversion to vocational schools among some immigrant groups could be addressed by providing more information about the education system for both the children of immigrants and their parents. Given the relatively high dropout rates from upper-secondary education that have been observed in previous research, increased information about vocational education and training (VET) could play a key role in reducing early leaving from education, and in training and integrating youths who are at risk of dropping out in upper-secondary education (Karppinen 2008; Kilpi and Jakonen 2011).

To ensure that more young people complete upper-secondary education, the OECD suggests designing targeted interventions that address the specific needs of youth who are at risk of dropping out, such as changes in the standard duration of courses, preparatory programmes or personalised support measures (Schmid 2001). However, coming from an immigrant background appears to impact boys' chances of finding an internship more than girls. It is also the case that among boys, the proportion of applicants who obtain an apprenticeship contract differs little when comparing descendants and foreign-born applicants in Norway (Norwegian Education Mirror 2019).

Segregation between schools

In Sweden, segregation between schools has increased. Housing segregation and the development of the new school system, with municipal and independent schools, have both played a role in this development (Skolverket 2018a; Skolverket 2018b; SOU 2020:28). One noticeable result of the segregation between schools is the division of schools into two major groups; one where native-born students compose the majority and one where foreign-born and descendant students do. This division between schools has led to a lack of native-born speakers in some schools and therefore missed opportunities for foreign-born students to improve their language skills in those schools.

Different measures have been implemented to try to integrate migrant and native students in schools. An example of an attempt to decrease segregation between schools can be seen in a small city in Sweden, where several smaller upper-secondaries were integrated into one large upper-secondary municipal school with the explicit aim of combining native and migrant students in one educational setting. The intention of this project was to create equal conditions for all students irrespective of nationality and background. Unfortunately, the new school encountered significant problems. In the end, segregation between schools in the city deepened as parents chose to enrol their children at other independent schools available in the area (Dahlberg 2021).

Another example we can cite is from a city in Denmark, where in 2016 the principal divided classes on the basis of student's names. Students with typically Danish sounding names were placed in one class while children with other less Danish names were placed in another. The purpose of this experiment was to encourage children from native Danish backgrounds to remain pupils at the school. It received an enormous amount of negative national and international press, who referred to the initiative as a form of "apartheid school" (Thurfjell 2016). Bussing children, as has occurred in the past in the US, has also been suggested in some municipalities in Sweden, but given that current Government policy allows parents and children the right to change school from one semester to another, this would likely fail.

School segregation is closely connected to housing segregation. In suburbs around major cities in particular, a majority of residents may be immigrants or descendants, and it is harder for children who live there to learn the native language. The problems associated with school and housing segregation are beyond the scope of this report, however it should be stressed that it is difficult for the school system, principals and teachers to provide a solution to these challenges alone.

Post-secondary education

How young people transition into adult life after mandatory schooling and upper-secondary education is important. This is, of course, an extensive research field that includes elements such as higher education as a path to entering the labour market and conditions in the labour market itself. Unfortunately, research on these transitions, especially longitudinal studies, are at best limited. This may be due to limited data (Finland and Iceland have had few immigrants, for example) and that recent developments have focussed on the integration and employment of the influxes of refugees in the last decade. We have been unable to find studies that compare all three groups, native-born, foreign-born and descendant children. Instead, the approaches appear to centre mainly on comparing native-born and foreign-born children.

Research has shown that foreign-born and descendant students believe that discrimination is less widespread in highly educated professions. This belief may provide a strong motivation for study for immigrant parents and their children (Rudolphi et al. 2021). This 'immigrant optimism' can be seen in surveys that asked students about their ambitions and plans for further study. In one such survey, conducted annually by Statistics Sweden since 2009/10, students in upper-secondary school were asked if they believe they would start tertiary-level studies within three years of graduation from upper-secondary education. In the most recent survey from 2019/2020, 88% of foreign-born females answered yes. This was the largest portion, ahead of foreign-born males at 68%, and native-born females at 67%. Less than half, 41%, of native-born males believed that they would begin tertiary education within three years.

When asked what type of programme they would like to study, a majority answered that they would apply to university programmes that provide a higher professional education such as a medical or law exam, including 82% of foreign-born females, 79% of native females, 76% of native males and 71% of foreign males. One difference noted between foreign-born and native-born females is that foreign-born females are more interested in programmes that lead to a general exam (such as a bachelor's degree in economics) than those that lead to a profession (such as nursing).

When asked about their first-choice field of study, males, both native- and foreign-born, were more interested in engineering and economics than women. There is also a difference between native- and foreign-born females, with the latter being more interested in medicine/odontology and nursing/care and the former in the social sciences and law.

The answer to the question 'why study?' differs between native and foreign-born students. The main reasons for natives (both females and males) are 'to get a more interesting job' and 'to get a job with a high salary'. Foreign-born students gave the same response, as well as 'to increase the chances of getting a job' and 'because a higher level of education offers greater status and influence'.

When asked how they would support themselves during their studies, an equal share

of respondents answered, 'with the help of the State Educational Grant'. Native-born females were more likely to also answer 'with wages' than the other respondents. Foreign-born males did not believe their families and relatives would support them financially to the same extent as foreign-born females and native-born females and males.

When asked whether their parents had encouraged them to continue to higher education, the responses varied: seven out of ten foreign-born parents had, and five out of ten native-born parents. Three out of ten parents of native-born females and males had neither encouraged nor discouraged their children in continuing to higher education, with the figure for foreign-born students being just two out of ten. When asked if friends influenced or encouraged them to start higher education, five out of ten foreign-born females answered that their friends did encourage them (49%), whereas for the other groups this figure is approximately 30% (SCB 2020).

In Norway, interest in higher education amongst foreign-born males and females differs somewhat from the rest of the population. Looking at participation levels on different programmes, the share of foreign-born students and descendants (both genders) is highest for master's programmes in pharmacy and odontology, relatively prestigious programmes in Norway (Statistics Norway 2021).

In Denmark, some politicians have claimed that people with non-Western backgrounds find it difficult to integrate into society. Despite these assertions, female descendants from non-Western countries are the strongest represented group when it comes to higher education. In Denmark, more females than males enter higher education in general. Only 6% of the Danish population aged 18-29 are descendants of migrants, but they make up 7% of students at universities and business academies. The gap has been increasing steadily since 2005, when the numbers were proportional. There are, however, many variations in choice of education among the aforementioned group (Clante 2021).

In Denmark, university programmes with a high share of descendant students tend to lead to specific careers with low risk of unemployment, for instance as a pharmacist, dentist or dental hygienist. Courses on which the majority of students are native Danes differ in this regard, including subjects such as literature, theology and geography. There are also large gender differences; a bachelor's degree in the natural sciences is among the top three choices for descendant women but lies only nineteenth on the list of most popular choices for descendant men.

Research conducted in 2019 (EVA 2019) examined the motivations behind these choices and found that making one's parents or family proud was a more common motivation among non-Danish minorities than among native Danes. There is a common misconception that migrants tend to aim for careers as lawyers, medical doctors or engineers, however this is not the case. Law degree programmes contain only 7% migrant students and 7% descendants, and medicine only 14% and 9% respectively. The proportion studying natural sciences is far greater, with 43% migrants, and in electronics and IT the figure is similarly high at 31%.

A new study, initiated by several Danish student and teacher organisations and conducted by Analyse and Tal (2020), presents significant findings on refugees' access to education in Denmark, and, as in many similar studies, it finds that this access is largely dependent on age at arrival. Refugees who arrive as young children

will end up receiving the same level of education as Danes, with 93% of those who arrive between the ages of 0 and 13 starting secondary or tertiary education, the same proportion as Danish children. This group enters the compulsory school system early enough to acquire native language fluency and assimilate socially. Refugees who arrive after the age of 13 are most likely to fail in catching up on their education and are most at risk of being left behind. For those who arrive between the ages of 14 and 17, the number drops even more sharply to 67%, as they fall between the final years of compulsory education and the beginning of secondary education in Denmark. Among this group of 14 to 17 year olds, the greater share of females manages to access secondary education. For those who arrive as young adults, only 19% enter the education system. This latter group is often urged to find employment and is frequently not informed about educational and vocational options in Denmark.

Overall, women are more likely to continue to higher education than men, and men are more likely to start vocational education than women. This is an interesting observation from a gender perspective; refugee families in Denmark generally come from countries where women face gender-based oppression, but after settling, daughters tend to pass their brothers on the educational ladder.

The same pattern occurs in Norway, where 46% of descendant girls attend higher education, a 4% higher proportion than for the rest of the population. For descendant boys, the figure is 36%, a 7% higher proportion than for the rest of the population. Taking a single country of parental origin as an example, in this case, Somalia, 41% of descendant girls are in higher education, 15% higher than the proportion of boys from the same national background (Kirkeberg 2019).

In Finland the proportion of foreign-born students in higher education is smaller than in the entire population. Just 6% of 18–24-year-olds have an immigrant background, while the proportion of new students at universities and polytechnics with this background was only 3%. However, examining education attainment to degree level, women from immigrant backgrounds have a higher level of education than native Finnish men, according to recent figures published by the Ministry of Labour in 2020 (YLE 21/01/2020).

There is a clear pattern in the Nordic countries that foreign-born girls both intend to enter higher education, and achieve this aim, to a greater extent than foreign-born boys. It would appear that very few measures have been taken to increase the number of males who continue to higher education; it seems to be left up to the individual. Good grades in earlier education naturally play an important role, and in that regard foreign-born girls have a clear advantage due to their better grades from upper-secondary education.

A brief look beyond compulsory schooling

The focus of this paper so far has been the education and integration of foreign-born and descendants' children from 0 to 19 years old and the educational gap between the genders. However, it could be interesting to include a snapshot of how this educational gap is represented within older age groups. As we know, education is the admission criteria to the labour market when starting adult life. Does the educational gender gap close as people grow older?

Figure 3a shows the proportion of descendants in the Nordic countries in upper- and post-secondary school and tertiary education in the age group 20 to 24 years old. As can be clearly seen, the gender gap persists, with more than half of descendant females in tertiary education in Denmark and Norway in 2018. In all the Nordic countries except Finland, more females than males are in tertiary education. Iceland has very few descendants that have not reached the age of starting tertiary education.

In Norway, a comprehensive study of the gender gap was published in 2019, showing that it has increased over time. The historical development of the gender differences in higher education is most distinct for young adults. In 1970, the proportion was 12% for men and 8% for women with a higher education in the age group 30–39 years in Norway. Around 1990, the gender gap had evened out, and in 2015 the proportion for men and women was 40 and 57%, respectively. Over the course of 45 years, the gender differences have increased from minus 4 to plus 17 percentage points in favour of women (NOU 2019:3).

The educational gap in this older age group is not decreasing, and according to results from younger age groups presented earlier in this report, the gap between females and males will continue to grow amongst descendants. As previously mentioned, migration to Iceland has been small and no descendants have yet reached age 20–24. Therefore, Iceland is not included in Figure 3a below.

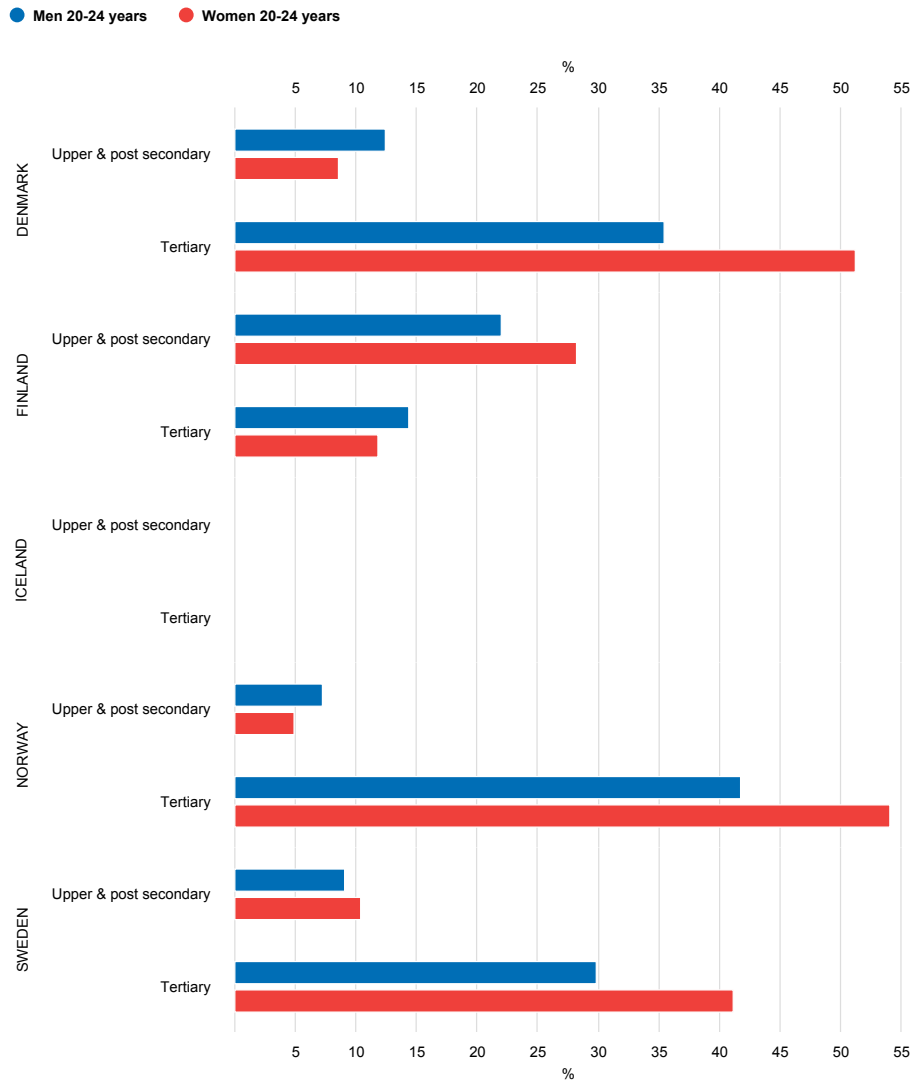


Figure 3a. Percentage of descendants in education 2018.

Source: Nordic Statistics database.

Figure 3b shows the educational gap between genders among the foreign-born as a percentage for 2018. Here, we find the same tertiary education gap between females and males, although overall enrolment is lower.

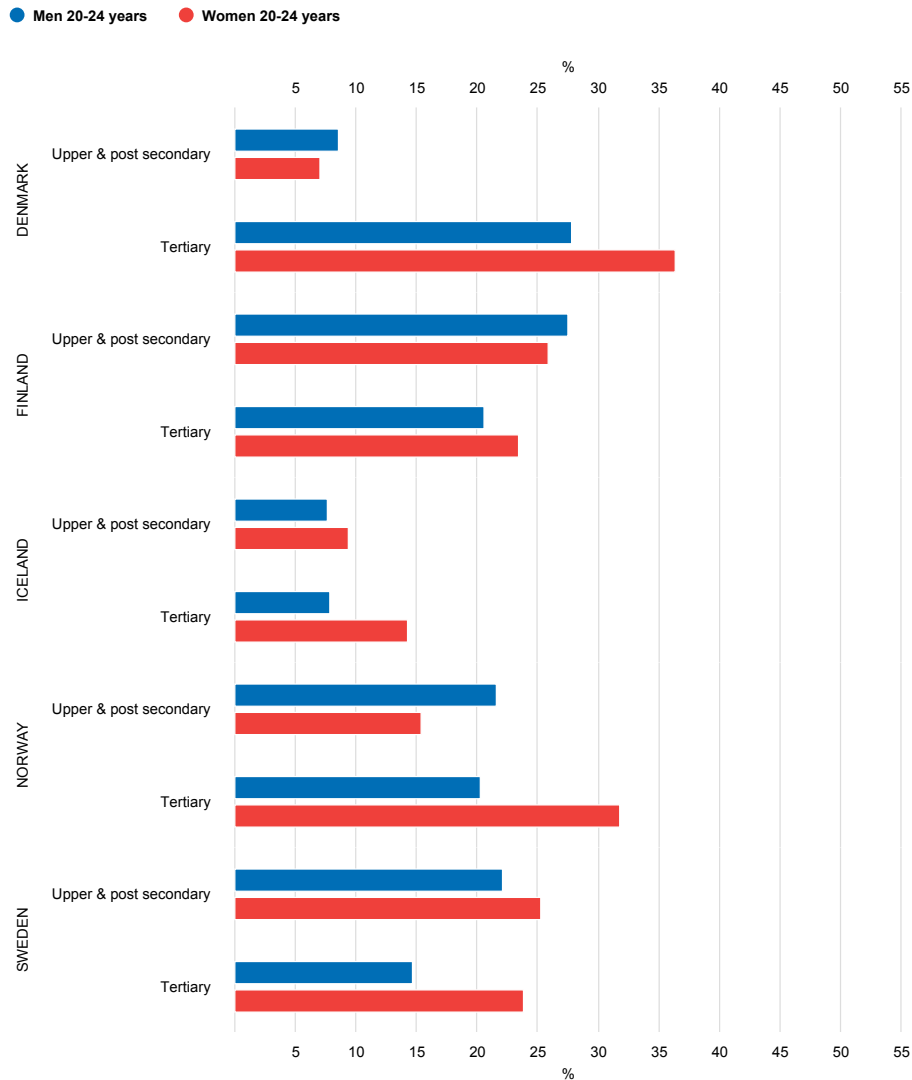


Figure 3b. Percentage of foreign-born nationals in education 2018.

Source: Nordic Statistics database.

Figures 3a and 3b show young adults in education. Does the educational gap change in the 25 to 34 age group? Figures 4a and 4b show the age group of 25–34-year-olds and how many have graduated from tertiary education. We assume that by the age of 34, most individuals have graduated from education and attained their highest level of education. What these figures do not reveal is age at immigration, and they may well include young adults who had already completed a tertiary exam at the time of immigration. We compared data from two years, 2015 and 2020, to ensure the results are not a one-year outlier. The pattern between the two years is very clear. There is a higher proportion of females who have completed tertiary education than males.

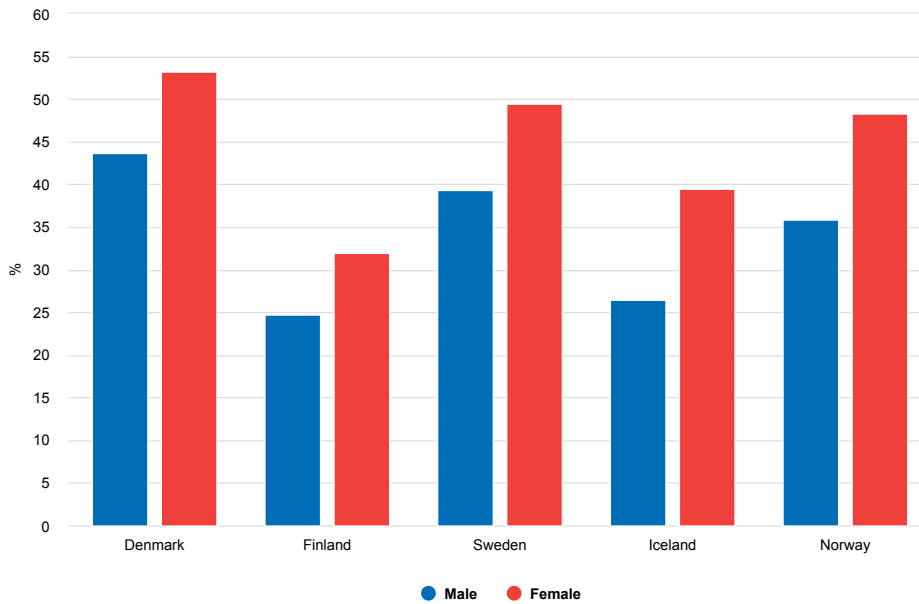


Figure 4a. Percentage of foreign-born nationals with tertiary education for the age group 25–34 years old 2015.

Source: EUROSTAT

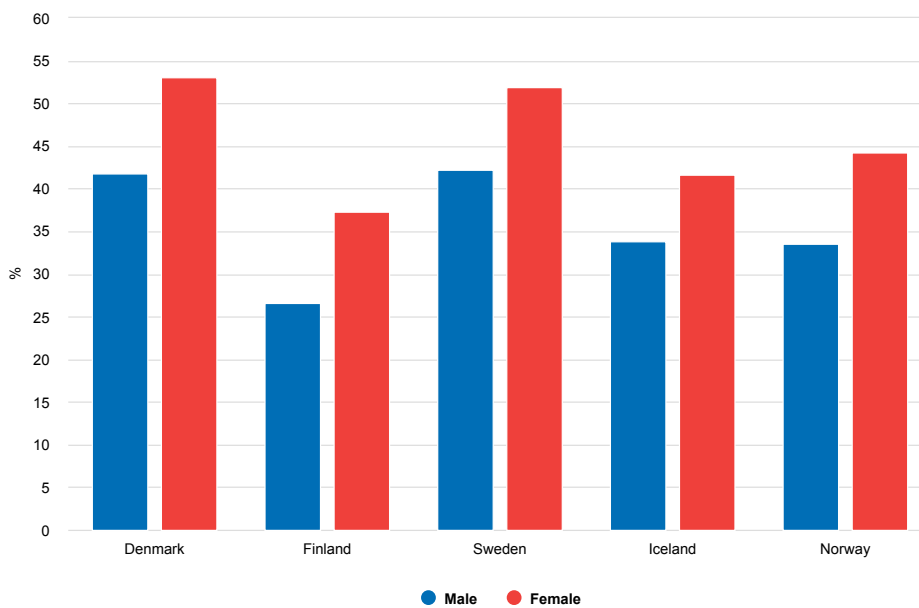


Figure 4b. Percentage of foreign-born nationals with tertiary education for the age group 25–34 years old 2020.

Source: EUROSTAT

For young adults not in education, an alternative option is employment. Will we find the same or a different gender gap between males and females there? Figures 5a and 5b show the employment rate for descendants and foreign-born nationals in the Nordic countries compared with native-born nationals for the age groups 20 to 24 and 25 to 29 years old. According to the figures, there is a gender employment gap among the foreign-born nationals in all the countries studied, displayed as a higher

employment rate for men than women. This gap is not as obvious for the other groups, descendants and native-born nationals, where the employment rate discrepancy between the genders is relatively small.

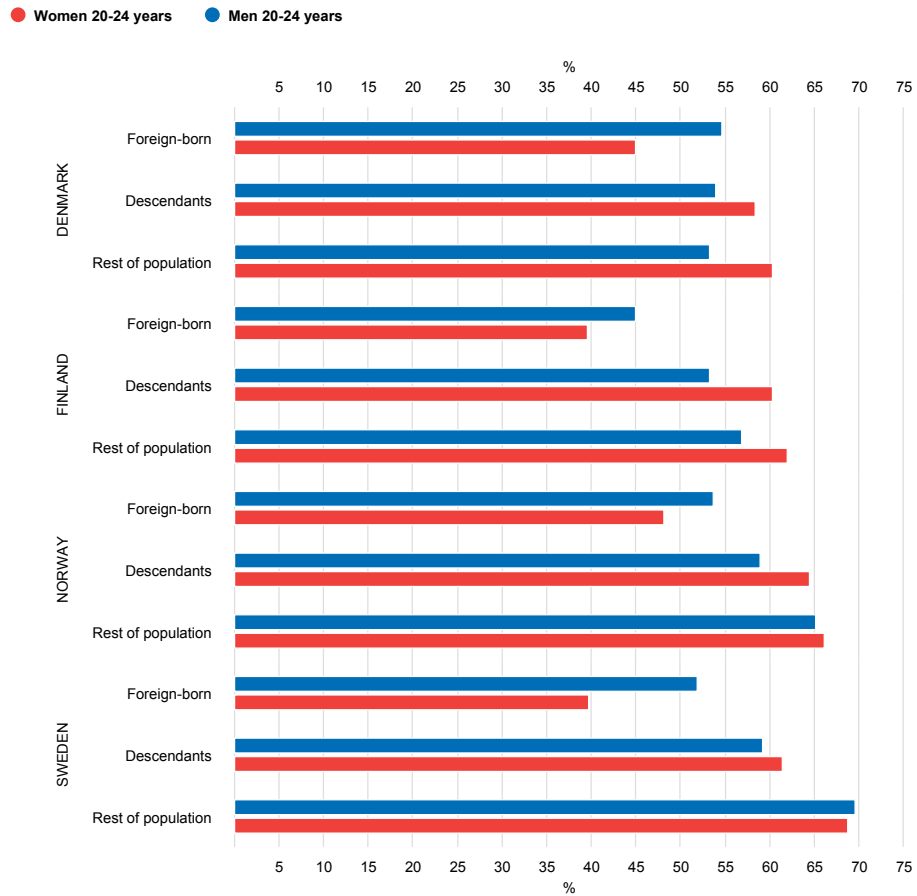


Figure 5a. Employment rate 2018 according to gender and migrant status for the age group 20–24 years old.

Source: Nordic Statistics database.

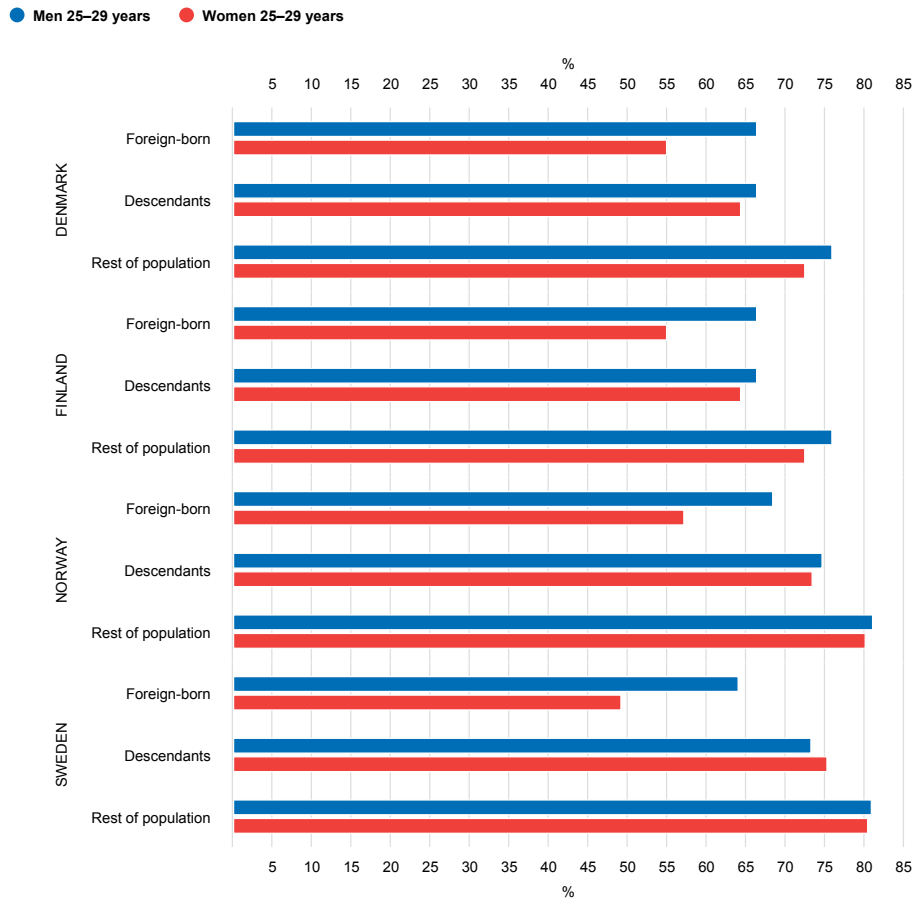


Figure 5b. Employment rate 2018 according to gender and migrant status for the age group 25–29 years old.

Source: Nordic Statistics database.

In summary, these figures show that the educational gap between men and women exists among young adults. Women attend higher education at a much higher rate than men. As to why foreign-born women have a lower employment rate than men, we can only speculate. One reason could be that they are enrolled in tertiary education at a greater rate, as shown in Figure 3b, another could be that they have started a family and have assumed children care duties.

The purpose of this report is not to answer the question why; its focus is to investigate the existence of the educational gap between women and men. As we have shown, the evolution of that gap can be clearly observed, and must be addressed if boys and men are not to be left behind.

Discussion

The aims of this report were threefold: First, to investigate differences and similarities in the gender gap and educational attainment in the Nordic countries, and examine if, and how, these countries have noted and addressed the educational gap between girls and boys. The focus is on children and youth from foreign backgrounds. Second, to explore what measures have been undertaken and implemented as a result. Third, to see if there are beneficial examples through which the Nordic countries can learn from each other's experiences.

As this report shows, similar patterns occur across the Nordic countries. Despite differences in demography, such as migration rates, we found a marked and similar development – girls perform better in compulsory school and upper-secondary education than boys. Girls have greater aspirations to attend higher education than boys and are more likely to do so. The general evidence from the Nordic countries is that girls with a native background perform best in school. Following them, we generally see boys with native backgrounds, but we have also discovered that the picture is slightly more complex. In many studies the results show that descendant and foreign-born girls outperform native-born boys. Among the boys, the ones with foreign backgrounds, in general experience the greatest difficulties in school. This conclusion points to a complex situation where gender and origin are entangled and that previously recorded outcomes are not a given. The evidence that gender often eclipses origin sheds new light on the question of integration of foreign-born children.

The situation where boys perform increasingly less well in school than girls is an international phenomenon often referred to as a boy crisis. This is a development in gender norms where an anti-study culture has come to dominate among boys. Performing well in school has developed to a position that stands in opposition to more conservative views on masculinity. This may be a consequence of the reality that boys and men formerly were able to gain employment with relatively high wages more readily than girls and women, simply due to their gender. For girls, their level of education is increasingly important, as it is most likely to guarantee better income in the future. The influence of the boy crisis can be clearly observed and interpreted in the research results we have examined in this report, however it is beyond our remit here to investigate and discuss changing gender roles in a broader perspective. Nevertheless, this is a research area that we believe warrants more attention.

What does the research show? As language skills are unequivocally considered an important contributing factor for children's educational outcomes, especially those with foreign backgrounds, much research and many of the related legislative reforms have focussed on this specific area. Studies have shown that parents usually communicate more with their daughters than their sons. In primary schools, boys are often seen as disruptive in teaching situations and receive significant negative attention. As girls are often quicker to learn a language, they may come to play the role of the family interpreter. Moreover, girls are generally more proficient in their

first language, which has also proven to be crucial when learning a new language. Attending preschool has been shown to be critical for migrant children since it may be the only situation where they have the possibility to practise the local language. Boys in particular benefit from language training in preschool.

What has been addressed and implemented? All the Nordic countries had previously introduced some form of child-care allowance to increase family's rights to choose the most suitable childcare for them. At time of writing, many of these child-care allowances have been reduced or removed, because research shows that they result in less integration and language training for immigrant parents, especially mothers, and their children. Concurrently, different measures have been taken to increase participation for all young children in preschools. In Norway, reforms to extend the preschool sector were introduced, while in Denmark and Sweden, authorities have tried to make preschool mandatory from an early age to increase participation, especially for migrant children. Finland and Iceland have much briefer histories of immigration from countries outside Europe and are only just beginning the process of developing a preschool system that includes an ambition for language training.

In Denmark the focus in primary education is on learning Danish. First language training for young immigrants from countries outside the EU, EES and Europe has been abolished in compulsory schools. Reducing first language schooling is a method that research has suggested is particularly harmful for migrants' ability to learn a second language. As a direct result, many students with non-native backgrounds are transferred to special education classes. This leads to isolation from a lingual environment with native-born peers. However, keeping students in an environment in which they have sufficient understanding of the teaching provided and can learn the local language may well require striking a delicate balance currently beyond the scope of many schools.

Another important aspect of the mandatory school system is that teacher-parent collaboration is crucial, and that shared responsibility is reciprocal. The teachers must try to understand the family's situation and parents must do their best to be involved in their child's education. It is important for migrant children and youths to practise their new language, but increased segregation in many Nordic cities has created a barrier in this regard. Different forms of integration projects for students, both those from areas with a high concentration of migrants and less segregated areas, have so far had little effect in the Nordic countries. A path to reducing the issues surrounding segregated schools has yet to be found.

In upper-secondary education, a recurrent problem is immigrant optimism. Many migrant students and their parents see the Nordic school system as an opportunity for acquiring a good education. However, students are sometimes overly ambitious, which may result in the student dropping out or inadequate academic achievement. A balance must be struck between not discouraging young males and females from attending higher education while keeping their expectations at a realistic level. To ensure that young people complete upper-secondary education, the OECD suggests designing targeted interventions that address the specific needs of youth at risk of dropping out. Some methods for achieving this goal may lie in changes to the standard duration of course, preparatory programmes, or personalised support measures.

In conclusion, what can the Nordic countries learn from each other? Early language training is crucial, and policies that isolate migrants from the main population may be harmful in the long term. Child-care allowance has proven to decrease a child's chances of learning a language. These allowances are often accessed by households where the new country's native language is not regularly in use. Consequently, children in these households receive a poorer understanding of the native language. Removing first language training in schools presents a problem, since it is harder for children who are not proficient in one language to learn a second one. This is particularly relevant for boys, who receive less language training at home. Being unable to learn the language at an early age, will significantly increase their difficulties in school. Many issues revolve around giving students a fair chance and having realistic expectations to what they can achieve. Overall, we can see that girls largely make greater use of the educational opportunities available, in all the Nordic countries.

This study has shown the existence of a growing gender education gap in all Nordic countries. It is a prominent issue that deserves further research; to study the reasons and consequences for both individuals and society of these growing differences in educational outcomes. The lessons that can be learned from female educational attainment in relation to helping boys improve their educational achievement will be an extensive field of study in the future. The goal must be to give every child the best possible opportunities in life, regardless of origin, background, or gender.

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