



Article

“Not Everyone Can Become a Rocket Scientist”: Decolonising Children’s Rights in Ethnic Minority Childhoods in Norway

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Abstract: This paper uses a case study to critically reflect on contemporary discourses in Norway connected to ethnic minority childhoods and children’s rights to education and work. Based on a narrative interview with an ethnic minority girl, Sadjā (aged 16), who is in state custody and lives with a foster family, we use a decolonial lens to explore the tensions in expectations and rights in her life and education. The tensions encountered are situated along three axes. The first axis illustrates tensions related to education, work, and responsibilities, as Sadjā’s family responsibilities are perceived by teachers and child welfare workers as preventing her from having “a proper childhood”. The second axis explores tensions connected to independence, educational choice, and “belonging to the state”, where Sadjā experiences that being in state custody results in being unable to “follow her dream”. The third axis reflects the tensions between parental expectations of “dreaming big” versus her surrounding environment’s anticipation of her simply getting a job. In sum, Sadjā’s experiences suggest that contemporary Western discourses—such as individualism, self-autonomy, and children as human capital—paradoxically curtail the educational rights and trajectories of ethnic minority children in foster care in Norway in unforeseen and unfortunate ways.

Keywords: children’s rights; education; child protection; ethnic minority; decolonial theory



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1. Introduction

Promoting and protecting children’s (and women’s) rights are essential parts of the Norwegian self-image and international reputation, which was recently harmed by international criticism of, and court rulings about, the extensive use of forced removals by the Child Welfare System (CWS). Several rulings by the European Court of Human Rights found that Norway has paid little attention to the parents’ right to family life, insisting that the child’s best interests should be explicitly balanced against the rights of the parents and that the CWS tends to prevent family reunification (Melinder et al. 2021). Child protection is also of concern to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2018), questioning Norway’s use of forced removals as in the children’s best interests, insufficient communication with ethnic minority families, and cultural and language disruptions for children with ethnic minority backgrounds in state custody. In addition, a recent White Paper describing and assessing the rule of law for children and families involved with the CWS concluded that immigrant children are overrepresented in forced removal cases, emergency measures outside the home, and as residents in foster care and child protection institutions (NOU 2023).¹

Reports examining the CWS’ encounters with, and treatment of, ethnic minority families disclose a general lack of cultural sensitivity and awareness of cultural differences in childcare (Helsetilsynet 2019; Aarset and Bredal 2018). The CWS tends to perceive a non-Norwegian ethnicity as problematic rather than a source of strength or resilience (Križ and Skivenes 2012), and research also indicates that some social workers believe that Norwegian ways of parenting are morally superior (e.g., Kristiansen 2014; Ylvisaker et al. 2015). Moreover, social workers strive to facilitate “ordinary” lives for ethnic minority youths,

emphasising individual interests over the family's well-being (Ursin et al. 2022). At the same time, ethnic minority parents perceive that the CWS encourages child emancipation and weakens family bonds, and report that such focus restrains their ability to raise their children (Tembo et al. 2021).

The CWS is an important arena for exploring how childhood is defined and understood, and is thus of strong relevance for Childhood Studies and the child rights field (Ursin and Ellingsen 2021). The ubiquitous attention paid to value and ideology-laden concerns and practices regarding children, childhood, and upbringing in the CWS creates a fertile ground for exploring questions such as: What can be understood as good (or not) family conditions for upbringing for children? How should parents and carers (not) care for children? Which roles are (in)appropriate for children and parents? Research on the CWS can, therefore, provide significant insights into the social, cultural, political, institutional, and professional discourses on childhood and upbringing in contemporary Norway.

How individuals and communities define and articulate their rights reveals a lot about their definition of themselves, their relationships with each other, and their understanding of outsiders (Ibhawoh 2007). In this article, we use a case study to critically reflect upon contemporary state discourses in Norway connected to ethnic minority childhoods and children's rights to education and work. Based on a narrative interview with an ethnic minority girl, Sadjja (aged 16), who is in state custody and lives with a foster family, we explore the tensions in expectations and rights in her life and educational journey. Children's rights scholarship must be disentangled from dominant Western epistemologies to remain relevant (Faulkner and Nyamutata 2020). Hence, we put forward a decolonial approach to children's rights. Before delving more into the tensions Sadjja experiences, we contextualise the study and then elaborate on our decolonial theoretical approach, before we describe the project's methodology.

2. Growing up in Contemporary Norway

Childhoods in contemporary Norway—a social democracy with a so-called Nordic model of economic and social policies—are heavily influenced by a comprehensive welfare state that seeks to enhance individual autonomy and promote social mobility. Being service-intensive, the Norwegian welfare state aims to ensure its citizens' social, health-related, and economic needs (Ylvisaker et al. 2015). Universal social and political rights are fundamental principles, with an ideology of equality and expectations of homogenisation through the adaptation of dominant cultural values. In the words of Ylvisaker et al. (2015), everyone is “expected to adapt to the majority's cultural model for the ideal citizen” (p. 224), which involves gender equality and active and inclusive participation in the workforce (arbeidslinja) (Kristiansen 2014).

Public education is considered one of the most critical measures in promoting social equality and the social integration of ethnic minority children, ensuring qualification for higher education and employment (Bendixsen and Danielsen 2020; Ringrose et al. 2023). Children are both entitled and obliged to attend primary and lower secondary education, and schooling is viewed as children's prime activity and responsibility (Križ and Skivenes 2012; Ursin et al. 2022). The Children Act (1981) gives children aged 15 the right to decide on their education (§32). Norway's open, choice-driven educational system offers an intriguing case for studying children's educational aspirations and futures, since access to higher education may be obtained without parental financial support (Friberg 2019; Melnikova 2023).

Engaging in children's schooling has become an increasingly important part of what defines good parenthood, and many ethnic minority parents find such expectations challenging (Bendixsen and Danielsen 2020). At the same time, parental authority is generally limited by cultural expectations of parental love and the socio-cultural discourse of children and youth as autonomous, competent, and rights-bearing individuals (Hennum 2002). The goal of childrearing in Norway concerns raising children with a “sense of self” and preparing them to become independent and self-sufficient in a capitalist and gender-equal society (Gullestad 1996a; Kristiansen 2014; Ylvisaker et al. 2015). This stands in contrast

to childhoods of the past, where the teaching of household skills was intertwined with the teaching of moral values, anchored in Protestant work ethics and the idea of “being of use” (Gullestad 1996a). Children learned to value the ability to work and the goodness of character.

3. Children’s Rights and Child Welfare Services

In contemporary Norway, children are seen as having moral and legal standings due to the interplay between society’s material conditions, living conditions, and ideological and political currents (Kristiansen 2014). The state has co-responsibility for children and children’s upbringing, and child and family policies are child-centric (Pösö et al. 2014; Ursin and Ellingsen 2021; Ylvisaker et al. 2015). Children received the judicial right to co-determination in 1981 (Children Act 1981, §31). This right was strengthened by the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989) in 1991 and its incorporation into Norwegian laws in 2003. The Child Welfare Act (1992), which regulates the CWS, states the need to detect neglect and behavioural, social, and emotional problems as early as possible (§3-1), and to cooperate with and respect children and their parents (§1-7); and that the CWS may remove the child to foster or institutional care if guidance and relief measures do not improve a child’s situation (§4-4).

The best interest of the child should be given paramount weight in all care given under the law (Children Act, §48, also anchored in Article 3, UNCRC 1989), with particular emphasis on providing children with stability, continuity, and care (Child Welfare Act 1992, §4-1). Public authorities have a mandate to intervene when this is in the child’s best interests (Skivenes 2011), denoting a “naturalness” of the state in family relations (Hollekim et al. 2016). Unlike many other countries, the Norwegian state is not only judicially required to protect children from unhealthy living conditions, but also to ensure and support development and growth (Skivenes 2011).

The Child Welfare Act (1992) states that children are entitled to be informed and share their opinions regarding all areas that affect them, and their views should be taken seriously (§1-6, also anchored in Article 12, UNCRC 1989). However, research shows that how participatory rights are implemented varies greatly. This is partly due to competing discourses about the competent child with participatory rights on the one hand and the vulnerable child in need of protection on the other (Ursin and Ellingsen 2021). As Angel (2010) asserts, perceiving the child as a competent actor challenges the CWS’ professional expertise, and paternalistic attitudes are often rooted in the conviction that they know what is in the child’s best interest. In addition, children’s (imagined and real) parental loyalty is viewed as an obstacle. Despite a strong consciousness of children’s participatory rights, Ursin and Ellingsen (2021) found five layers of interpretation and implementation among social workers in the CWS, ranging from mere rhetoric recognition to listening to children in search of solutions. Regardless of solid documentation reporting the benefits of the last approach, both for the children’s well-being and case outcomes (van Bijleveld et al. 2015), children’s perspectives, opinions, and wishes are often not considered in the Norwegian CWS’ decision-making (Bakke and Holmberg 2014; Christiansen 2012; Stang 2007).

4. A Decolonial Approach to Children’s Rights

In the following analysis, we employ a decolonial theoretical lens to unwrap the paradoxes of Saja’s rights. Decolonial approaches have been described as a Latin American perspective that “seek to demythologise Eurocentric colonial structures of knowledge, being and power,” questioning “the idea of modernity itself as a unique cultural and political event which put Europe at the centre of universal history and civilisation, past and future” (de Castro 2020a, p. 3). Quijano (2007) calls this intimate connection between modernity/coloniality the cultural complex of coloniality, where European experience is centred as a universalist paradigm of knowledge. The notion of *coloniality of power* (Quijano 2000) addresses the interlinkages between power, knowledge, racial hierarchy, and capitalism, stressing how such connections reflect a continuation of Euro-centred colonialism

through Western imperialism. The colonisation of the imagination of the dominated is part of a seductive power connected to the logic of development and modernity, which continues to have a dominant position (Quijano 2007). Lugones (2008) re-read Quijano's work on the colonality of power with an intersectional lens and a consciousness of race, class, gender, and sexuality. She argues that the colonality of power also encapsulates a "modern/colonial gender system", which creates differential gender arrangements along racial lines where non-white colonised women are subjected and disempowered. She asserts that since colonality endures as a form of domination that affects Black and Brown women across the world, it offers an effective tool to unwrap the imbalances of power in today's world system. Decolonial theory, according to Sánchez (2020), beyond having enabled noticing the imbalance between what has counted so far and what has been rendered invisible, assists in the task of decentring; it implies reimagining and rearticulating power, change, and knowledge through multiple epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies.

Colonisation is deeply entangled with histories of human rights in manifold and ambiguous ways. Mignolo (2009) raises the fundamental question of "Who Speaks for the 'Human' in Human Rights?" to which he responds, "an actor embodying the Western ideal of being Christian, being man and being human. In other words, 'human' in human rights is an invention of Western imperial knowledge" (p. 10). Drawing on Mignolo and Spivak, Maldonado-Torres (2017) observes a pattern in which "the definition of human rights leads to the creation of experts who are designated to speak to the colonised and other marginalised peoples about the rights that they possess" (p. 130). As Ibhawoh (2007) notes about the history of Nigeria and other former British colonies, the rights discourse permeated traditional African social and political systems, European missionary work, the antislavery movement, colonial conquest and control, and the nationalist movement. The rhetoric of rights imbued both the coloniser's legitimation of his right to rule and civilise, and political struggles to challenge and ultimately end colonisation, facilitating domination and liberation.

In this article, we are inspired by Barreto's (2018) three-fold decolonial approach to human rights, which involves (1) taking a critical stance toward Eurocentric thinking, (2) retrieving concepts of the colonised world, and (3) establishing a dialogue between these two to move beyond colonial suppression of alternative ontologies.

In response to the first, since human rights and children's rights are allegedly universal, there is a need to critically explore this claim. As Barreto (2018) posits, "The hegemonic discourse of rights presents itself as abstract and ahistorical, as if it was the result of the exercise of thought, without any geopolitical site as a factual source" (p. 490). To position contemporary rights discourse within its European roots severely weakens the legitimacy of its claims to universality (Faulkner and Nyamutata 2020). The codified versions of human rights were developed and conceptualised in the West through Enlightenment libertarianism, the French and American Revolutions, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 (Ibhawoh 2007), foregrounding humans as autonomous (Fregoso 2014). This is also argued to be the case of the UNCRC (Liebel 2012), where the independent and competent child is the pinnacle of rights (Aitken 2018; Laufer-Ukeles 2016; Zafran 2010).

Advocates of cultural pluralism criticise the human rights movement for being too Western-oriented and reminiscent of Western imperialism and paternalism (Ibhawoh 2007). Regarding modern children's rights agendas, these are perceived as new forms of imperialism seeking to control and dictate the lives of children from the Global South, justified through a toxic cocktail of power, morality, and the superiority of Western discourses (de Castro 2020b; Faulkner and Nyamutata 2020). Ibhawoh (2007) argued that international codified human rights have an inherently colonial dimension since they involve challenges to the practice, and sometimes even sovereignty, of particular regions in the name of universal standards deriving from and enforced mainly by the West (p. 5).

Such take-on is nuanced by Barreto's (2018) second endeavour to decolonise human rights, and the need to acknowledge the contributions of non-Western societies to the development of the contemporary human rights corpus. A decolonial perspective on human rights implies thinking from different imaginaries of human, humanity and rights (Fregoso

2014). [Ibhawoh \(2007\)](#) finds the idea that human rights originated in the West and then were exported to Africa deeply problematic, paternalistic, and ahistorical; many African societies had long traditions of rights talk preceding European contact. Yet, such traditions have been obscured by contemporary understandings of rights. In the case of the UNCRC, it is an international and legally binding treaty setting out the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of every child. It remains the most ratified human rights convention in the world. However, the roots of children's rights are many and profound, historically and geographically (see [Liebel 2012](#) for more). The roots not only nourish and ground children's rights in various localities, but also aid in the further unfolding of how rights are understood and performed. As children's rights both pre-existed and co-exist with the UNCRC, we argue that it is necessary to disentangle children's rights from the convention as the latter is *not* a metonym for the former. The UNCRC articles of relevance for the following analysis are many, including Article 3 about the best interests of the child, Article 12 about children's right to participation, Article 28 about the right to education, and Article 29 about the right to education to develop respect for their own culture. However, a decolonial approach implies broadening our horizons beyond the codified understandings of human rights, embracing epistemologies that have been sub-alternised in the process of colonisation. Thus, we do not engage analytically with these articles but instead offer alternative translations of the judicial–practical twists and turns of Sadja's journey.

In approaching children's rights from a decolonial perspective, [Faulkner and Nyamutata \(2020\)](#) describe how non-Western societies “espouse communal goals more highly, such as learning to live in harmony with one another, competent participation in social events, obedience to authority” (p. 75). According to [Ibhawoh \(2007\)](#), the quintessence of the formulation of rights in precolonial African societies was the conception of the individual as a moral being, endowed with rights but also bounded by duties, which fostered communal solidarity, sustained the kinship system, and ensured cohesion in communities. This, however, is not due to African exceptionalism but to moral, epistemological, and ontological traits recognised in many cultures beyond the African continent ([Ibhawoh 2007](#)). The close interlinkage and mutually dependent categories of rights and duties are explicitly emphasised in the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child ([ACRWC 1990](#)). The preamble, section title, and Article 31 of the ACRWC emphasise children's duties, stating that children have the duty “to work for the cohesion of the family, to respect his parents, superiors and elders at all times and to assist them in case of need” (31a), and “to preserve and strengthen African cultural values in his relations with other members of the society, in the spirit of tolerance, dialogue and consultation and to contribute to the moral well-being of society” (31d). This contrasts with the Western ideology of rights, based on the autonomous individual, motivated by self-interest and obliged to nothing and no one ([Fregoso 2014](#); [Ibhawoh 2007](#)). [Twum-Danso \(2009\)](#) describes how the values of respect, responsibility, and reciprocity are key to understanding children's rights in African contexts. This entails that children are taught from an early age to respect and obey elders and to take their advice, aligned with the [ACRWC \(1990\)](#), to develop into respectful and respectable citizens. Children are also expected to have responsibilities, as taking part in chores is necessary to integrate into the social and economic fabric of the community. Lastly, reciprocity forms a central component of the socialisation process whereby children are expected to repay their parents' efforts both in the present and future.

The third dimension of [Barreto's \(2018\)](#) decolonial approach to human rights encourages dialogue between these two strands of exploration, creating a “third space” (cf. [Ibhawoh 2007](#)) where Afrocentric conceptions of human rights are cross-fertilized with Western visions of human rights. Such a dialogue enables a more comprehensive and plural understanding of human rights ([Barreto 2018](#)). This aligns with our previous effort to bridge the UNCRC with African ethics and ubuntu ([Ursin et al. 2022](#)). This article builds on our previous analysis in an attempt to step into this third space, decentring universalism and challenging the limitations of the hegemonic discourse, situating children's rights in the current global context of pluralism and multiculturalism, and embracing “relational

ways of being and existing in a common world, in order to transition from being into we-ing" (Sánchez 2020, p. 279).

5. Methods and Ethics

This article builds on a narrative methodology, specifically a narrative interview with Sadjá (pseudonym), a 16-year-old girl. The interview was part of a qualitative study with upper secondary school students of ethnic minority and majority backgrounds in a Norwegian rural context. Narrative interviews are defined as semi-structured and open interviews where the researcher and the participant together explore the meaning of events (Gudmundsdottir 1996). Youth narratives become particularly momentous as young people tend to interrogate their being in the world, in the past, present, and future, through self-defining narratives (McAdams et al. 2006). Narratives are products of both the individual and society. Hence, a personal narrative also uncovers features of a historical epoch (Gullestad, Marianne 1996b). According to Jackson (2002), narratives either reaffirm the existing paradigm or introduce new perspectives that challenge the social order. Therefore, marginalised people's narratives are of particular importance as they are commonly silenced and denied public recognition.

Narrative interviews are particularly valuable when researching sensitive topics and often lead to rich and detailed interviews (Birch and Miller 2000). This interview took place in school, with careful consideration given to explaining that participation was voluntary. Process consent and being attentive to Sadjá's needs and concerns in the interview were also of concern, as underlined in the feminist "ethics of care" (Sevenhuijsen 1998). Sadjá had lived in Norway for over a decade and spoke fluent Norwegian. The interview was thus conducted in Norwegian. The role of the interviewer was to assist Sadjá in telling her story in a safe and supportive way. The interview focused on past childhood experiences, present youth life, and future aspirations. We learn about Sadjá's life from her point of view, her interpretations of past experiences, and her thoughts and feelings about her life as an ethnic minority girl in a Norwegian context. Through narration, memories are made comprehensible in words. However, memory thwarts and words may confine. People's narratives might not only fail to tell the whole story, but can also contain something new. As Gullestad, Marianne (1996b) recommended, the "impurity" of autobiographical narratives is best read as reflexivity and a vital quality to study. We therefore approach Sadjá's life story as an intrinsic case study, centring on and exploring the distinctiveness of her narrated experiences rather than aiming to generalise (Stake 2005).

Sadjá's interview was extensive, both long in duration and rich in details. In the process of analysis, we became aware of the many tensions she described. We used In Vivo coding to keep the codes rooted in Sadjá's own language (Saldaña 2013), ending up with codes such as "wants to live alone" (vil bo alene), "not heard" (blir ikke hørt) and "belong to the state" (tilhøre staten). Through these empirically near codes, we identified four kinds of tensions, which were later merged into three axes: First, between family norms and domestic practices, and the expectations of the teacher and social workers about rest and school, resulting in the first axis. Second, between Sadjá's educational desire and the decision of the CWS, and third, Sadjá's lack of autonomy, resulting in the second axis. Fourth, between the father's educational aspirations and the teachers' and foster mother's expectations, resulting in the third axis. We engaged in a community of validation (Kvale 1996) through continuous discussion and co-interpretation while interpreting quotes and choosing theoretical perspectives.

As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) has emphasised, the term "research" itself is "inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism" and "probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary" (p. 1). The collective memory of how knowledge about indigenous lives has been collected, classified, and represented through and against the understanding and experience of the Western world has denied self-creation and self-representation of indigenous ways of knowing (Smith 2012). Decolonising research pays careful attention to the colonial and imperialist past and present injustices, aiming

for social justice. It is a “humble and humbling activity” (Smith 2012, p. 5) that requires epistemic humility (Walker and Martinez-Vargas 2020) and an openness to other ways of knowing. It does not require a particular model or approach, although some qualitative scholars have suggested exercising critical reflexivity, reciprocity, and respect for self-determination, embracing “Other(ed)” ways of knowing and embodying transformative praxis (Thambinathan and Kinsella 2021, p. 1). This study’s interconnections speak to methodological concerns and theoretical and analytical ambitions.

Decolonising research includes respectfully centring and privileging concerns and worldviews of previously “Other(ed)” perspectives (Thambinathan and Kinsella 2021). The question of who can speak or represent such concerns and worldviews, however, is a complex one, as decolonial research is highly political, which we, as scholars of ethnic majority background in a Norwegian context, must consider. We see ourselves as “allies” in this process (Held 2019), not claiming to speak for Sadjja but taking her concerns seriously and exploring their significance in the context of Norway through decolonial analysis and discussion. Our interpretation of Sadjja’s narrative is framed by our familiarity with the overall project and Sadjja’s interview, our research experience from the cultural region Sadjja’s family come from, as well as our academic backgrounds as social anthropologists working on migration and multiculturalism in Norway. We also have experience living outside our country and continent of origin, thus having an understanding of how “things could be otherwise”. This helps us illuminate Sadjja’s encounters with state discourses from different angles. In addition, examining children’s rights documents and their connections to culture and politics can help explore myriad ways of knowing, being, and doing, and the reasons why they might come into tension.

6. Analysis

In the analysis, we aim to decolonise Sadjja’s rights in connection to education and work, focusing on three axes of tensions found in her narrative: The first axis illustrates tensions related to learning, work, and responsibilities; the second axis explores tensions connected to independence, educational choice, and “belonging to the state”, and the third axis reflects the tensions between parental expectations of “dreaming big” versus the environment’s expectation of her simply getting a job. These axes illustrate how tensions in epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies clash (cf. Sánchez 2020). Through a decolonial approach to children’s rights, we propose a dialogue between the differently valued worldviews and childrearing practices, as well as formalised children’s rights documents (UNCRC and ACRWC), that are at play in the encounters between Sadjja and contemporary state discourses in Norway.

6.1. First Axis

The first axis illustrates tensions related to learning, work, and responsibilities, where Sadjja’s teacher and child welfare workers perceive her family responsibilities as preventing her from having “a proper childhood”. While living with her father and little sister, Sadjja recounts having a “mummy-less home” due to her stepmother spending long periods abroad. In addition, her father had two jobs and was often away for long days. She became a “mini-mum”, taking care of her sister, including bringing her to kindergarten on her way to school from when she was in Grade 5, and helping in the house from an early age. Sadjja reasons this was “because of my culture, where it is expected that you must [do so] when you are the oldest daughter”. She admits that it was a lot of responsibility: “In periods, at school, I was less focused and such because I had a lot to do at home. I had to clean and tidy. . .” The workload at home affected her school attendance and performance, and she describes the following:

Then there was this day, or it had happened several times, that I was late at school because I had to drop by kindergarten first. And I don’t drive [laughs], so I had to wait for the bus and all that. So, I always came late, and I overslept, and I never remembered my homework.

Eventually, her teacher started questioning what was going on at home. Sadjja told her about her domestic responsibilities, to which, according to Sadjja, the teacher concluded: “No, this is too much responsibility” [. . .] She said, “You should not do this much; you should be a child, you’re only 10–12 years old [. . .] You must relax”. Sadjja explains that this was the first time she realised she had a lot of responsibility; for her, this was “normal”. Eventually, Sadjja, her teacher, and her father had a meeting:

[My dad] said that he understood but that he could not do much. He needed my help. He needed help from the authorities, from someone. Then, we figured that contacting the Child Welfare Services was the best way to do this.

Ethnic minority parents in [Bendixsen and Danielsen’s \(2020\)](#) study reported feeling lonely in their parenthood in Norway due to the privatisation of parenting and parental responsibilities compared to the view of childcare as a collective enterprise in their home countries (cf. [Twum-Danso 2009](#), further explored in the second axis). Without knowing Sadjja’s father’s thoughts, this could be relevant to his understanding of, and acceptance towards, receiving help from the school and the CWS.

According to Sadjja, the social worker in the CWS decided to place her and her sister in temporary foster care with a family in rural Norway so that “your dad can work as much as he wants, and you get to relax [. . .] Just be a child again”. When Sadjja recalls her first stay in foster care, she describes:

I got to relax and be with youth, right? [. . .] So . . . it was nice, kind of good. But at the same time, I realised that it wasn’t for me—honestly. Because I wanted to be active and cook and vacuum-clean and be. . . because I realised that I was useful, I became useful in the family, and that dad couldn’t do without me, you know? That was a very nice feeling.

After a period in foster care, Sadjja’s father found a job, allowing him to be home by dinner. The sisters returned home. She explains that her father became “a mum-dad-role”, doing the domestic chores and taking care of Sadjja and her sister. She reasons that she became “more or less a regular teenager”. Then she continues:

Until I thought: “You know what, I want to be a mini-mum again”—I wanted to. It came from me and my instincts, kind of. I wanted to. Then I started again. I began cleaning again.

As accentuated in Sadjja’s narrative, several discourses seem to be at play, intersecting views and values connected to both childhood and ethnic minority girls. First, Sadjja’s narrations of the reasoning of her teacher and the CWS—moving her into foster care to be able to “just be a child again”—suggest a strong presence of a childhood ideal consisting of good (formal) education, leisure activities, and friends ([Križ and Skivenes 2012](#)). This supports [Gullestad’s \(1996a\)](#) observation that Norwegian youths are expected to seek independence from the restrictions of family life as independence is perceived as crucial in developing autonomy, identity, and selfhood. The emphasis on Sadjja’s need to rest echoes dominant childrearing goals in Nordic countries, connected to happiness and play at the expense of obedience and “hard work” ([Tulviste et al. 2007](#)). Yet, in this lies a paradox, as Sadjja is still expected to pursue schooling. Her heavy workload—“too much responsibility”—is viewed as resulting only from her domestic chores and not from school obligations. This puts Western values and notions of education and learning in the centre, marginalising alternative views that render participation in domestic work and sibling care vital to childhood socialisation. The emphasis on formal education in Western childhood discourse is part of the capitalist agenda, where children are perceived first and foremost as future workers and consumers. The views of the teacher and the social workers seem to be rooted in a belief that Norwegian (middle-class) parenting is more developed, as found in studies ([Hollekim et al. 2016](#); [Ringrose et al. 2023](#); [Ylvisaker et al. 2015](#)). This belief is ideologically anchored in liberal values of freedom, autonomy, and equality, othering and deprecating alternative values and worldviews as inferior ([Kristiansen 2014](#)). Sadjja’s trajectory into foster care uncovers how implementing her rights relies on “experts” designated to speak

to and act on behalf of marginalised peoples (cf. [Maldonado-Torres 2017](#)). Such experts serve as “persuasive and influencing vehicles in advancing a specific discourse grounded in a particular tradition of thought and values” while warranting their civilising mission upon ‘inferior’ cultures” ([Sánchez 2020](#), p. 285).

While acknowledging that resting felt “kind of good”, Sadjja expresses a need to engage actively in the family’s practical and social aspects of domestic work. With cultural links to West Africa, Sadjja might have an embodied experience of the worldview of ubuntu. Ubuntu is an indigenous African ethics about personhood or humanness, emphasising the relationality of human life ([Ramose 1999](#)) and how “a person is a person through other persons” ([Ahiauzu 2011](#), p. 1101). As an integral part of everyday life, transmitted through fables, proverbs, traditions, and socialisation, ubuntu emphasises values such as compassion, tolerance, care, and solidarity ([Bonn 2007](#)), with a focus on practices such as sibling caregiving and children’s participation in family life through work, as expected and valued parts of childrearing. When Sadjja states how it was a “good feeling” to help in the home, she taps into such cultural values, which present a different value system than children’s need to go to school and play. Through a decolonial lens, so-called “child labour” tends to be misconstrued as abuse ([Faulkner and Nyamutata 2020](#)) rather than appreciated as an invaluable form of learning and a crucial part of childhood ([Twum-Danso 2009](#)). This is reflected in Sadjja’s case, where conflicting expectations and idea(l)s about child upbringing and what is in children’s “best interest” are visible. On the one side is the emphasis on formal education and Sadjja’s need for rest and “being a child”, as emphasised in article 31 of the UNCRC. On the other, her desire to help in the home and be a “mini-mum” reflects children’s duties and responsibilities to parents and communities, as emphasised in article 31 of the ACRWC. Curiously, these potentially conflicting values, illustrating core values connected to childhood and family life, are both relegated to article 31 in their respective documents (UNCRC and ACRWC).

Decolonial feminist Magdalena [León \(2011\)](#) draws on indigenous worldviews when challenging patriarchal capitalist orientations toward dominant understandings of development. She underscores the importance of care and care relations as a vital (though often invisible or neglected) part of societies. She suggests that principles of solidarity, reciprocity, and interdependence must substitute the exploitation and competition associated with a capitalist economy. This echoes decolonial understandings of human rights as anchored in collectivist worldviews marked by, and governed through, interdependency and interconnectedness ([Faulkner and Nyamutata 2020](#); [Fregoso 2014](#); [Ibhawoh 2007](#); [Ursin et al. 2022](#)). Furthermore, as [Sánchez \(2020\)](#) and others note, the emphasis on rights over duties and national citizenship over family, clan, or kinship membership does not apply to many African communities.

Ethnic minority girls are positioned as particularly vulnerable in the Norwegian mainstream discourse ([Hollekim et al. 2016](#)), targeted by normative understandings of both the best interest of the child principle and gender equality ideals. Although we do not know the mindset of the teacher and social workers Sadjja describes, there may also be a gendered dimension to their decision. In her interviews with social workers in the Norwegian CWS, [Kristiansen \(2014\)](#) detected a strong feminist agenda when working with ethnic minority families, representing a hegemonic and ethnocentric feminism often present in the state discourses in Scandinavia. The social workers perceived their mandate to be instruction about gender-equal family life and behaviour as ethnic minority girls and women were understood as oppressed by the patriarchal structures and gender roles of their culture of origin, and in need of the social workers’ support. The social workers often sought to inculcate processes of “self-realisation”, independent of whether this was an expressed wish of those involved.

As Sadjja resists the childhood ideal that is being forced upon her (returning voluntarily to her “mini-mum” role), the women [Kristiansen \(2014\)](#) spoke with perceived their new “rights” envisioned by the CWS as a duty to conform to the expectations of the Norwegian state. The social workers, on the other hand, interpreted resistance as caused by patriarchal

domination and not as emanating from the girls' and women's will and desires. One social worker recounted a case with an ethnic minority girl who had many domestic responsibilities due to her mother's medical condition. The girl's loyalty to her mother was problematised, reasoning that the world has "moved on" and given girls the right to self-realisation. The solution was to persuade the girl to opt for out-of-home care. Alternative norms and values—such as parental loyalty and responsibility—were perceived as deviant and damaging for the girl. This perspective was rooted in, and permitted by, as [Kristiansen \(2014\)](#) argues, a child-centred and individual-oriented approach in the CWS (see also [Ylvisaker et al. 2015](#)).

6.2. Second Axis

The second axis explores tensions connected to independence, educational choice, and "belonging to the state". In the interview, Sadjá recounts that things worked fine for a while when she and her sister returned home. They moved to a different part of Norway when her father got a new job. This new life was disrupted when her father had to return to his country of origin due to family problems. He left the sisters in the custody of an "auntie", a friend from his home village. Sadjá explains that the "auntie" contacted the CWS when he took longer than promised. Sadjá and her sister were moved into temporary foster care once more, this time in the new city where they resided. By then, Sadjá was in her final year of lower secondary education. She recounts that she was fine with moving into the new foster family, that the ladies who took care of them were kind and that she felt well, reasoning that it was because she had moved so many times in her life:

It didn't matter where I was, as long as I knew I would return to my parents, who knew that I was fine and so on. Then it doesn't matter. So, I didn't care where I was. [...] My sister, too. The same. She had, as I said, we had moved so many times that... it didn't matter. We just moved, and... everything went well.

Sadjá's "ease" with the decision to move into foster care and her argument that moving was not an issue as long as she would be reunited with her parents later on might have surprised the case workers, perhaps underlining the feeling that the correct measures were taken.

However, with attention to the ubuntu worldview, there are different lenses of interpretation. The African proverb "it takes a village to raise a child" expresses the communality of childrearing in line with the philosophy of ubuntu ([Leonard et al. 2022](#)). Considering all members of the family as family, including children's parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts, siblings, and their families, [Muchanyerei \(2020\)](#) emphasises how concepts such as the "extended family" in the African context can be criticised as being a Western and divisive concept. When Sadjá's father left them in the care of their "auntie", he might have relied on family to care for his children, as is common and valued. The practice of fosterage, bringing up children one did not give birth to, is widespread on the African continent ([Twum-Danso 2009](#)), and such arrangements are preferred to institutional childcare arrangements ([Leonard et al. 2022](#)). As expressed in Sadjá's narrative, their situation was instead interpreted as unstable, discontinuous, and destructive.

Since this was not the first time the sisters had been in foster care, the CWS decided on permanent measures. Sadjá explains:

They reasoned: "This has happened before. The parents don't provide proper care for the children. They move too much, and we must solve this because this can't continue; we can't return them to their parents". I didn't know about this; as I said, everything went well as long as I got to see mum and dad again, right? So, *everything* happened behind my back (emphasis original).

The sisters were moved back to the first foster family, nearly 1000 km from their new home. Sadjá recollects the message she received that although Sadjá and her sister managed well, this is not how it "should be", as parents should not leave their children. Hence, she and her sister must stay in foster care until they turn 18. For Sadjá, this also meant moving away from the school of her dreams.

When addressing this period, Sadja talks about her love for dance. She had applied for an upper secondary education programme of music, dance, and drama in a nearby city and was thrilled to learn that she was chosen to audition:

I wanted to be a dancer. Because that is what I love doing, that was what I wanted to become. [...] It was [name of school], which was my dream because it was popular where I lived. Everyone talked about it, or—big school, new school, fantastic, right? And I was going to audition and was so excited [...] But two days after I got that envelope, “Congratulations, you have been admitted”, you know. . . Then I found out that I must move [to my first foster home]. And here, there is no music, dance, and drama.

Sadja also had a boyfriend at the time, living in the city of the school of her dreams. She reasoned that by now, she had a lot of experience of being alone, taking care of herself and her little sister. Thus, she anticipated moving out and living by herself, following her career dream, and seeing her boyfriend:

I wanted to live alone. Because now I had managed by myself so well. You know—I have been a mini-mum for several years; I can clean, take care of myself and... I have not only taken care of myself but also my sister.

Sadja reasoned that she was as ready as she could ever be. However, as the CWS decision relied on a devaluation of the informal education, domestic skills, and cultural capital Sadja’s upbringing had provided her (described in the first axis), the kind of autonomy enhanced by the African values of respect, responsibilities, and reciprocity (Twum-Danso 2009) was not acknowledged. She continues:

But despite all that, I was not allowed to because they had already decided, and the judges said it was better to be with my sister in [the first foster home]. So, that was it then.

Although Sadja was glad to reconnect with her old friends when moving back to her first foster home, remembering, “I was happy for about two days, but when everything settled down—I kind of, it all sunk in, then I was just sad. I did not want to be here”. She reflects:

I could not dance in school, something I had been dreaming about for a *long* time. I had to move away from my boyfriend. I . . . could not live alone either. And it was *so* terrible (emphasis original).

Sadja feels she is not heard, being excluded in decision-making about her life. Being a foster child leaves her in an in-between space, which makes her feel like she does not belong.

I get sad sometimes. Because there are so many things I could have done better, that could have been better. I want to, I would most of all. . . hm. . . because I know what I want. And I am, I am soon 17 years old [laughs], so it would be nice to be listened to.

Sadja’s narrative reveals how her doubly marginalised position—as an ethnic minority child and a foster child—has robbed her of the legal right to choose her educational path since the age of 15 (Children Act 1981, §32). It breaches her right to co-determination as specified both by the Children Act (1981, §31) and the UNCRC (1989), stating that importance shall be attached to the opinion of the child and that the opinion shall carry significant weight when the child is above the age of 12. Furthermore, the Children Act (1981, §33) states, “Parents shall steadily extend the child’s right to make his or her own decisions as he or she gets older and until he or she reaches the age of 18”. The legal framework supposed to ensure Sadja’s mounting participatory rights is the antithesis of her experiences, soon turning 17 and not being listened to.

The Children Act is designed to ensure that the child’s best interests are primary considerations in matters related to custody, living arrangements, and parental responsibility. Yet, at the core lies the desultory and elusive character of the principle. Although the child’s best interest principle is often argued in a taken-for-granted manner, it remains ambiguous as a guideline for decision-making. As such, the principle is potentially subject to significant

exploitation of power in determining—based on certain (mis)understandings—what is in the best interest. [Skivenes and Sørsdal \(2018\)](#) note that Norwegian legislation provides decision-makers with strong discretion, with only a few requirements placed on the considerations that they must consider in child protection cases. Despite contemporary legal and academic discourses of children as competent actors, social workers in the CWS often hold a paternalistic conviction that they know best ([Angel 2010](#)). It seems that in Sadjja's case, there is an absence of a solution-based approach ([Ursin and Ellingsen 2021](#))—an approach that is recognised for improving both the child's well-being and case outcomes ([van Bijleveld et al. 2015](#)).

Sadjja feels that she has no say in her life, but, in addition, that those responsible for her are not holding that responsibility either—since, as she puts it, “I belong to the state”. She explains that the foster mother must receive approval from the CWS for her to travel to visit people and receive visits (including from her boyfriend). Such processes are extremely bureaucratic and time-consuming, involving many parties and meetings. She continues:

I can't stand it. It is a horrible life if you ask me. I do not want it, so I become very sad. And everything I do, it's like that. [...] They are watching me all the time. I am monitored, regardless of what I do. “What are you doing? What is that?” Grades, school, everything.

Not being allowed to make her own choices is accompanied by a general feeling of being constrained by the system, as all her actions and decisions, from educational choices to seeing her boyfriend, are decided by the CWS. Sadjja feels voiceless and under surveillance rather than being a youth charting the course of her life. Paradoxically, the system that aimed to let her find her path rather than living her life “for others” (helping her father and sister), as described in the first axis, ends up making Sadjja feel trapped. The liberal values saturating the Norwegian society and pushing Sadjja into foster care for the first time—individualism, autonomy, and self-realisation—are not as available for Sadjja as they may appear. This suggests that for children in state custody, following their dreams may be an illusion.

The arguments pushing independence to the forefront in Sadjja's early trajectory—moving her away from family obligations perceived as impeding her autonomy, education, and development—have vanished, as the CWS and the court argue that Sadjja cannot live alone but needs to remain with her younger sister. Her sibling care obligations, which were the origins of her journey within the CWS, keep her in state custody. Paradoxically, while heavily problematised and devalued initially, the CWS now relies upon the same values: Sadjja must waive her dreams and ensure her sister's well-being.

While parental authority is commonly restricted by expectations of love and the discourse of children as autonomous and competent individuals, this is not the reality in state custody. The CWS questions, problematises, and curtails parents' attempts to exercise authority—wielding the children's status as a rights-bearing individual—while exercising an even more extreme version of authority when moving them into state custody ([Hennum 2002](#)). The welfare state's ambition to enhance individual autonomy and social mobility seems geared to certain citizens only (further explored in the third axis). The entitlement of rights rests upon the idea of the autonomous individual who is motivated by self-interest and has no care obligations (cf. [Fregoso 2014](#); [Ibhawoh 2007](#)). This individualistic approach to rights does not recognise and protect existing care relations (cf. [Laufer-Ukeles 2016](#); [Ursin et al. 2022](#); [Zafraan 2010](#)). In an effort to preserve the relationship between the sisters, Sadjja's opinion of what would be in her best interest is overruled. The CWS does not balance these priorities in an ethically sound and inclusive manner (for instance, by enabling Sadjja to attend the school of her choice and remain near her boyfriend and sister).

6.3. Third Axis

The third axis reflects the tensions between parental expectations of “making it big” versus the surrounding environment's expectations. Throughout her childhood, Sadjja's father had high ambitions for her future. She explains:

If I could become a doctor, he would be the happiest man in the world. He always wants you to try to do as well as possible. So, he always said, “You have to dream big” and all that, you know. Go to school and become a *president* (emphasis original).

Sadja admits that although her dream was to become a professional dancer, she had considered doing a doctoral degree one day to please her father:

I will just have to take that doctoral degree if he wants that. That was what I was thinking. Because it is, again, about culture, that. . . I mean, dancing, creativity, and things like that—they are almost *nonsense* [. . .] you cannot *live* from doing that (emphasis original).

Sadja talks about her father’s encouragement as something she understood and complied with. Her father’s attitude towards education coincides with previous research in Norway, where ethnic minority parents often place a high value on their children’s schoolwork, and have high expectations and communicate these clearly (Bendixsen and Danielsen 2020; Grødem 2009; Melnikova 2023; Orupabo et al. 2020). The reasons for such a “cultural ethos” (Orupabo et al. 2020) are many and complex, including a view that more education is needed for ethnic minority people to have equal employment opportunities as the ethnic majority population (Fangen and Lynnebakke 2014). In this way, the father’s encouragement and expectations may be interpreted as acts of love, care, and concern; “I don’t want you to suffer as I do”. Considering he initially had two jobs to make ends meet, he possibly had low-salary jobs with minimum formal education requirements. High education may also be perceived as insurance to gaining recognition in Norwegian society and an attempt to conform to the values communicated by teachers and social workers (as seen in the first axis), as well as politicians and policy documents. Education is commonly seen to increase a sense of belonging in society among ethnic minority parents (Bendixsen and Danielsen 2020; Fangen and Lynnebakke 2014). Furthermore, the degradation of a professional dance career might be caused by a fear of Sadja being unable to secure a stable job in the future. Ethnic minority parents with low socio-economic backgrounds are reported to be afraid that their offspring will fail to realise upward mobility in Norway and become an economic burden to society (Bendixsen and Danielsen 2020; Melnikova 2023).

Considering African approaches to children’s rights and the emphasis on intergenerational reciprocity, the father’s expectations might also have another dimension. When children are raised with an awareness of a social contract, they must not only carry out responsibilities and show respect and obedience to their parents through childhood but also provide future support (Twum-Danso 2009). Even though in a Norwegian context, children’s rights and privileges are given without expectations of anything in return, it is more common among children with cultural backgrounds where the communitarian ethos is valued to study hard out of respect for their parents (Grødem 2009) and to ensure their economic well-being in the future (Twum-Danso 2009). Here, children’s educational successes are not seen as individual successes but as belonging to the family (Bendixsen and Danielsen 2020; Orupabo et al. 2020).

Due to her father’s absence when she applied for upper secondary education, Sadja felt less pressure and decided to apply for music, dance and drama. Schooling had never been a problem for Sadja, and her father’s encouragement was something she valued, which was noticeable in her grades. She explains that although her grades worsened slightly when moving away from him, they were still above average. Sadja reflects on the changing attitudes to her educational trajectory due to her surroundings:

It’s funny because that is where the ‘culture crash’ comes in again, you know. If I had only lived with my dad, then school would be *everything*; school is the key to the future and happiness—school, school, school. It’s the first and the only thing you should think about when you are my age. But now that I’m not living with my dad, I’ve heard that. . . “you should do what you enjoy doing”, and that means that if school is a bit difficult, then take. . . do as well as you can, and if

you are not a rocket scientist, then oh well, we need someone who can drive the bus too (emphasis original).

Sadja mentions how her father would strongly discourage vocational educational programmes, whereas, in foster care, the situation is different: “Vocational programmes, it’s okay, it’s nice, you’re working, you are part of society—you contribute. You’re doing what you should do”. According to Sadja, her foster mother thinks that not everyone can become a rocket scientist. Sadja has also met people who have told her directly to lower her expectations, such as one of her previous teachers:

A teacher told me straight out that there was no point in me trying something difficult because... I would not get very far anyway. [...] I think that his view, the way he looked at me [...] he spoke honestly. He looked at my results, he thought that I would not get very far, and... so he said it so that I would understand...

Sadja felt sad and confused, thinking that there must be something wrong with her:

I became very sad. I was like... why, why me—what am I doing wrong, you know? At first, I didn’t understand anything. Because he is a *teacher*, he wouldn’t say this unless it was *true*, I thought then. It had to be true. Why, what is it with me? [...] Why can’t I... kind of, be smart. Or why can’t I go far, I thought (emphasis original).

Her second foster mother requested a meeting with the school. In the meeting, the teacher confirmed his viewpoint, this time in front of everyone: “No, she will not get far. There is no point”. Although others said that he could not talk to a student that way and that a teacher was supposed to make students want to study, Sadja carried this experience with her years later. Sadja also reflects on how the lowered expectations towards her educational trajectory could be connected to her African background. “Lately, there has been a lot of criticism among immigrants and stuff like that, that they take up a lot of space and we take jobs and all that, there is no room for everyone,” Sadja reflects, referring to the current political climate in Norway.

In this last axis, the well-documented high expectations of many ethnic minority parents are contrasted by the teachers’ and the foster mother’s discouragement of dreaming big. In sum, the circle is closed: Sadja’s right to (formal) education is crippled by encouragement to lower her aspirations. This diverges from teachers’ reported anticipation of ethnic minority students to show liberal “Norwegian” values (Ringrose et al. 2023), as the goals of self-realisation and self-maximation are made irrelevant to Sadja. Instead, she should have what are deemed “realistic” life goals for “someone like her”. Yet, this purports the view of education as a tool for integration in the labour market. As Ringrose et al. (2023) argue, the individualisation of the responsibility for the integration of ethnic minorities to culturally assimilate is based on the idea that

to have any chance of succeeding in their future, of getting a job, of having a ‘happy life’ or of connecting to Norwegian society, their students need to become as Norwegian as possible as soon as possible, however (im)possible that may seem (p. 14).

Encouraging her to have low expectations and helping her realise “her place” in society is framed as Sadja’s “best interest”, both in her foster mother’s and teacher’s claims. The welfare state’s ambition to advance social mobility seems to pertain only to certain citizens. While some are encouraged to follow their dreams, others are merely expected to contribute. This rests upon the paradox that although the state desires and requires ethnic minority citizens to become as Norwegian as possible, this is enveloped in doubts about whether they will attain this goal (see also Ringrose et al. 2023). The third axis completes the cycle of paradoxes in Sadja’s residential and educational trajectory, as her first move into foster care may be interpreted as the commendation of formal schooling, whilst her talents in, and desires for, formal schooling are later heavily deterred.

Colonialism and capitalism foster a system wherein gendered possibilities are narrow for women, according to Lugones (2008). Research documents how female students of

ethnic minority backgrounds, to a more significant extent, experience a request to lower their educational aspirations by teachers and counsellors (Melnikova 2023). Although their care work at home is disregarded and discarded (as seen in the first axis), they are commonly expected to take on similar care responsibilities in the formal job market (León 2011). The presence of ethnic minority women has become necessary to uphold the health sector in contemporary Norway, as ethnic majority women increasingly distance themselves from low-status care occupations (Seeberg 2012). Although Sadjá does not mention being encouraged to work in the health sector, she must balance societal demands to participate in the formal job market and contribute to society with the strong appeal not to excel too much. This resonates with the Law of Jante, a Scandinavian code of conduct to convey social control and disapproval towards personal accomplishment.

Recent research reveals, however, that the “cultural ethos” of many ethnic minority families of African origin (described above) has positive outcomes for their children. Friberg (2019) finds that being family-oriented positively affects educational aspirations and school effort, while Orupabo et al. (2020) state that this ethos increases their sense of belonging in higher education. However, Melnikova (2023) finds that in the encounter between the school (and in Sadjá’s case, the CWS and foster mother) and family dispositions, students negotiate who they are, what their futures can and should be, and which education is (not) feasible for them. While the state and the family may complement each other in inscribing what is (not) worth attending to, they compete in Sadjá’s life. As Melnikova (2023) also discovers, it seems like both the high aspirations of her father and Sadjá’s own dreams are waning in the encounter with the state’s translation into a “realistic” future for her. What is deemed out of reach may end up devalued in the long run when Sadjá potentially ends up internalising this position in society.

7. Conclusions

In this article, we have used the case of Sadjá to critically reflect upon contemporary state discourses in Norway connected to ethnic minority childhoods and children’s rights to education and work. Sadjá, who moves between her father’s home and foster care, must navigate tensions in expectations and rights for life in general, and in her educational journey in particular. The analysis suggests how normative and gendered discourses perceive childhood concerning education, responsibility, and work in constraining, exclusionary, and ethnocentric ways. In short, Sadjá’s right to education relegates other ways of learning in, and contributing to, the family based on values precious in her family’s country of origin. Contemporary Western discourses—such as individualism, autonomy, and children as human capital—seem to paradoxically curtail the educational rights and trajectories of ethnic minority children in foster care in Norway in unforeseen and unfortunate ways. In Sadjá’s case, both her contribution to the family sphere and, later, her cultural capital of taking care of herself are devalued, and the state overrides her wishes in defining her “best interest”. She finds that the contemporary youth narrative of the possibility of becoming whatever you want if you work hard for it is, at best, deceptive. Her experiences, thus, illuminate the contrast between what codified versions of children’s rights *claim* to do and what they *do* (cf. Fregoso 2014).

As Liotta and Szpiga (2022) warn, since human rights have been articulated “through the grammar of modern law, then they inevitably must have imported some of the mythical features of law that are instrumental to colonialism and capitalism” (p. 161). This implies that although exercising one’s rights has come to be taken as something inherently good and an index of social progress, rights discourses may also serve to insulate and legitimise power (Ibhawoh 2007; Sánchez 2020) through expert voices (Maldonado-Torres 2017). In Sadjá’s narrative, certain childhood and family life discourses perpetuate and uphold the colonial divide between “Us” and “the Other” (cf. Liotta and Szpiga 2022). Disguised as a universal paradigm of knowledge, the legacy of colonialism continues to uphold interlinkages between power, knowledge, racial hierarchies, and capitalism (Quijano 2007).

Although most people Sadja encounters on her journey may have her best interest in mind, the “best interest” principle is complicated, as demonstrated in the analysis. In cases where ethnic minority children are placed in state custody, the understanding of what “best interest” entails requires dialogue and reflection. While the principle might need to be “open enough” to make possible the near universal ratification of the UNCRC, this openness leads to a variation in what children’s “best interest” means in different contexts. It is, therefore, crucial to avoid leaning on normative, hegemonic, and ethnocentric notions of childhood and upbringing, and avoid misusing existing power structures. Sadja’s narrative informs us of the importance of having professionals who are trained in critical reflection, cultural sensitivity, and decolonial approaches to children’s rights and family life. We need to maintain a humble and open-minded approach when considering a child’s best interest and embrace sub-alternised voices and worldviews by, for instance, translating the principle through the philosophy of ubuntu and the ACRWC as alternatives to individualisation and the UNCRC. As Sánchez (2020) reminds us, when a system based on a specific tradition claims universality and forms a model that all must follow, it denies alternative ways of being and doing. In this article, we have explored such alternative ways by using a decolonial approach to address the insularity of children’s rights in the Norwegian context, as well as suggested ways of thinking otherwise.

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Note

¹ Numbers from 2022 show that 8249 children were under the care of the Child Welfare Services (CWS) in Norway, out of which 754 were immigrant children and 1057 were children born in Norway with immigrant parents (SSB 2023).

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