

Nordic reforms to improve the labour market participation of vulnerable youth:

An effective new approach?

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Abstract This article asks how the legitimacy (recognition or misrecognition) of “ethnicity” and “disability” influences public policies to promote the inclusion of young adults in the Nordic labour markets. The article assesses the case for seeing misrecognition and lack of accommodation as significant factors behind troubled transitions from school to work, and the case for regarding social regulation (or self-regulation) as important ways of preventing, counteracting and correcting exclusionary factors in the transition from school to work among the two groups. The article argues that increased attention at the implementation stage of the policy process is necessary to be able to assess whether seemingly novel or innovative regulatory policies and measures actually enhance equal opportunities.

Keywords youth, disabled youth, migrant worker, employability, labour force participation, Norway, Scandinavian countries

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Introduction

This article assesses the case for seeing misrecognition and lack of accommodation as significant factors behind troubled transitions from school to work, and the case for regarding social regulation (or self-regulation) as important ways of preventing, counteracting and correcting exclusionary factors in the transition from school to work in four Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. Focusing on the cases of minority ethnic youth and youth with disabilities, the article examines how the legitimacy (recognition or misrecognition) of the two target groups influences

the design and implementation of public policies and innovative measures to promote labour market inclusion.

Arguably the Nordic countries are witnessing a shifting balance between redistributive and regulatory policy measures to promote employment among young adults in general and minority ethnic youth and youth with disabilities in particular. While Nordic welfare states have a tradition of encompassing redistributive or transfer-oriented arrangements to enhance employability and provide income security during periods outside employment, regulatory provisions to accomplish welfare policy objectives have been relatively less developed. However, since the 1990s the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and a number of experts have advised the Nordic countries to reform their systems of redistributive policies and, to various extents, these countries have introduced reforms to enhance the financial incentives to seek and retain paid work (Prinz and Tompson, 2009, p. 58). At the same time, the Nordic countries have introduced new regulatory provisions and innovative measures to improve the employment prospects and opportunities for vulnerable youth groups.

Of particular interest is the implementation of provisions that aim to prevent discrimination and tackle the lack of accessible work places and appropriate accommodation. We basically refer to three kinds of provisions aiming to enable minority ethnic youth and youth with disabilities to find and retain suitable employment: i) legal provisions that confer on employers possibilities and constraints regarding hiring and firing; ii) government-created financial incentive structures for employers; and iii) voluntary agreements and commitments encouraging a corporate culture which promotes diversity through progressive recruitment and accommodation measures within the workplace.

Observers have noted that while there has been a relative shift towards recognition in many Western countries, “justice today requires both redistribution and recognition” (Fraser, 1995, p. 2). An underlying assumption is that the labour market has cultural dimensions, expressed in norms and beliefs. Cultural norms and images have been institutionalized (routinized to the extent that they have become taken-for-granted assumptions) in the organization of the labour market, and tend to be biased against some individuals and groups. To ensure that the labour market is inclusive, governments need to combine redistributive and regulatory policy measures. As the relative shift

towards recognition has taken place, the field of labour market inclusion policy has become wider and more complex (Williams, 1995, p. 129).

This transformation has responded to demands for voice, visibility and equal worth on the part of minority ethnic groups and persons with disabilities (Hobson, 2003). Additionally, Nordic public policies have been influenced by broader international changes such as the emergence of an international human rights regime and the emerging European Union (EU) policy mix of market integration and social regulation to correct for market deficits (Halvorsen and Hvinden, 2009).

This article will first examine cross-national similarities and differences in the design of new and innovative social regulatory and redistributive provisions which are regarded as being of relevance to the labour market inclusion of minority ethnic youth and youth with disabilities. Second, the article examines the reactions of employers and the two youth groups to new regulatory provisions in Norway. Third, the article closes with a discussion of how the legitimacy of the target groups influences the design and implementation of public policies to promote labour market inclusion in the Nordic countries.

Nordic labour market policy and vulnerable youth

In general, the Nordic model of welfare has stood for public responsibility for guaranteeing cash benefits and social services to citizens through publicly-funded provisions that cater to all needs and the whole population, financed largely through tax revenues. The Nordic income maintenance systems have been comparatively generous, with the official aim of providing benefits enabling people to maintain a near-equivalent standard of living during periods of illness, incapacity or unemployment as during periods of paid work. To fund these systems, the Nordic countries have placed a great significance on the attainment of high levels of labour market participation. Public authorities have taken an active role vis-à-vis other key social institutions, especially through the regulation of the labour market, stimulating tripartite collaboration and encouraging renewal and innovation in the economy in general (Moene and Wallerstein, 2001).

Income maintenance: Health and residence as allocation criteria

In the Nordic countries, redistributive policy measures aim at being “universal” and not limited to specific business sectors or population groups. Generally, entitlement to income maintenance during periods out of paid work has only been restricted by a country’s rules for legal residence.

Hardly any provisions have been dependent on becoming naturalized and being granted formal citizenship in a Nordic country.

However, entitlement to rights-based social security benefits has been conditional on a minimum duration of legal residence in the country and the amount of earnings and tax contributions made as an employee within the labour market. Young adults immigrating to the Nordic countries are excluded from rights-based social security until they have a sufficient record, both, of labour market participation and duration of legal residence in the country; e.g. a single mother immigrating to Norway is not entitled to receive a “single parent allowance” during the first three years she lives in the country (Hatland, 2011). Though newly arrived migrants with legal residence in the Nordic countries have been eligible for means-tested financial assistance, the payments have in some programmes been lower than regular social assistance payments. This has been the case with the Danish “Start Help” and “Introduction Allowance”.

While the level and duration of participation in the labour market have been important criteria in gaining entitlement to social insurance benefits, poor health and impairments have been additional or alternative criteria of eligibility. To be assessed and certified as “sick”, “impaired” or having “reduced working capacity” has generally provided more legitimacy than being “unemployed”. During the last two decades the Nordic countries have individually spent more on income maintenance for persons in receipt of sickness benefit and persons with disabilities than most other European countries (Eurostat, 2013).

For newly-arrived immigrants and young adults without a previous record of labour market experience and earnings (or contributions), means-tested social assistance has been the most relevant income maintenance scheme. Nelson (2013, pp. 392-393) finds that Nordic social assistance programmes were among the European programmes offering the highest adequacy level for alleviating poverty in the 2000s. Yet the benefit level remained below 60 per cent of the median income in the Nordic countries.

Social services: Education and on-the-job training

In general, the Nordic countries have spent more on active labour market policies (ALMP) than most other EU countries. In 2011, ALMP expenditures in terms of GDP ranged from 0.45 per cent in Norway, 0.80 per cent in Sweden, 0.85 per cent in Finland, to 1.59 per cent in Denmark. This

compares to the 0.44 per cent of GDP average for the OECD countries (OECD, 2013, Table S). Among the Nordic countries, Finland and Norway spent a larger share of total public expenditures on active labour market programmes including income maintenance for persons without paid work while they were participating in qualifying measures, often education. Consistent with the priorities of public expenditures, all Nordic countries except Sweden have the largest share of ALMP participants in training in Europe (OECD, 2013, Table S).

In addition to general labour market inclusion policies, Nordic governments have introduced targeted policy measures for young adults to enhance their inclusion in the work force. In particular the Nordic countries have since 2008 – in response to international economic uncertainty – expanded education and training programmes targeted at young adults younger than age 25 to adjust their individual skills and increase their professional attractiveness for employers. Finland, Norway and Sweden have introduced a social right – “the youth guarantee” – to education, training or work for youth aged 16–24, while Denmark has introduced several “youth-packets”. In Norway, young adults with disabilities have been a particular target group (Norwegian Ministry of Labour, 2013).

A prominent strategy in Nordic labour market inclusion policies has been that measures should not be targeted at immigrants or their native-born children. With the exception of Denmark (some job centres have launched initiatives targeted specifically at minority ethnic youth aged 15–17); we find no specific strategies for minority ethnic youth. Rather they are supposed to be covered by the general labour market inclusion policy and general youth policy. One argument for this has been that targeted measures would be stigmatizing. All countries have, however, adopted measures for newly-arrived immigrants, including language and training programmes.

As regards the measures applied to the general population who are out of paid work, on-the-job experience through support schemes for employers and wage subvention have been used to a lesser extent among immigrants who are out of paid work, with education being the preferred scheme for young immigrants (Leibig, 2007; Leibig, 2009; Hardoy and Zhang, 2010; Djuve and Tronstad, 2011).

The social regulation of diversity

To encourage employers to hire young adults in general, Sweden and Denmark have reduced the tax for employers who hire young adults, while Finland has introduced wage subsidies to temporary positions for graduates younger than age 25 (Nososco, 2011). In the Nordic countries, disability has to a greater extent justified more generous entitlements to reasonable accommodation and positive and innovative measures than ethnicity.

Disability

In the countries under study, early regulatory measures included legal provisions giving employers duties in relation to employees with disabilities, such as strengthened job security through the general labour code. For many years, Sweden has had one of the strongest frameworks of labour protection legislation, with the strongest legal provisions against employment discrimination in Europe. It also has a stricter enforcement of employer obligations for workplace accommodation on the grounds of disability than the other Nordic countries. By contrast, Denmark has been among the OECD countries with the weakest job security protection and obligations for employers, and – of the Nordic countries – the weakest protection against workplace discrimination on the grounds of disability (Liisberg, 2011). In 2008, Norway adopted an affirmative action duty for employers to promote non-discrimination in recruitment, working conditions, promotion and protection against harassment, and to report annually on measures to promote the objectives of the discrimination Act. To date, enforcement of the duty appears to have been weak or absent. Of the Nordic countries, Norway gave the largest priority to voluntary social regulation to enhance the employment prospects of young adults; the Inclusive Workplace Agreement was first adopted in 2001, but recruitment of persons with disabilities has been given lower priority than reducing sick-leave absence and early exit from working life (Ose et al., 2013). Sweden and Denmark gave higher priority to providing employers with financial incentives (cash benefits and tax reductions) for offering employment opportunities to persons at risk of exclusion from the labour market; on-the-job experience through support schemes for employers and wage subvention (OECD, 2013, Table S).

Ethnicity

For the largest part of the twentieth century, the commitment of Nordic countries to addressing the issue of ethnicity was limited by difference blindness. Of the Nordic countries, Sweden has adopted the most and Denmark the fewest positive-action measures to improve the employment prospects of minority ethnic youth. Offering a distinctive approach from other Nordic countries, Swedish social regulation requires employers to carry out actions to ensure that recruitment methods reach an ethnically-diverse pool of potential applicants (Craig, 2007).

Since 2007, all Norwegian state-owned enterprises have been encouraged to adopt recruitment plans to ensure the inclusion of immigrants and children of immigrants. In the period 2008–2012, public employers could choose to hire applicants with a minority background even if the applicant was ranked behind the most qualified candidate (Orupabo, Jensen and Storvik, 2009). From 2012, public employers have had to choose the applicant with a non-Western background if the person has approximately the same qualifications. In Finland, since 2004, persons with an immigrant background can be favoured in the recruitment process when candidates' qualifications are otherwise equal. Additionally, public employers must develop an equality action plan, identifying measures to foster equality and prevent discrimination (Government of Finland, 2010). Denmark has been more reluctant to provide the opportunity to positively discriminate in favour of workers with an immigrant background to enter into employment or an occupation “and only in exceptional cases [made] juridical and political allowance for minority rights and cultural claims based on minority status” (Hedetoft, 2006, p. 403).

Summary of priorities

We find large differences in how the Nordic countries allocated the resources to ALMP in the 2000s. Although some of these differences are related to differing and inconsistent classifications of expenses across the countries, the broad pattern agrees with earlier research (Hvinden, 2004). Altogether, the increasing salience of diversity has furthered a more complex mix of policy measures combining redistributive and regulatory policy instruments in Nordic labour market policy. That said, redistributive or transfer-oriented arrangements to enhance employability and provide income security during periods outside employment remain more developed than regulatory provisions. Although the Nordic countries have adopted a number of positive and

innovative measures to improve the employment prospects of young adults with disabilities, parallel policy measures targeting minority ethnic youth have been more limited. While all Nordic countries have attributed importance to cultural “sameness” as a precondition for societal cohesion, Danish policy has been more influenced by scepticism with regards to ethno-cultural diversity than the other Nordic countries (Kymlicka, 2012, pp. 14, 26).

The next section examines the reactions or adjustments of employers and vulnerable youth to the new and emerging regulatory provisions and measures in Norway.

Explaining the role of social regulation: The adjustment strategies of employers and vulnerable youth

To understand under which circumstances the social regulation of diversity is likely to be more effective, it is necessary to understand the reactions of employers and the target groups that are intended to benefit from such provisions. During 2012–2013, the authors interviewed eight employers who had committed themselves to the inclusion of ethnic minorities or persons with disabilities, and also twelve ethnic youth and youth with disabilities who had managed to achieve some experience with paid work. The interviews provided data about the social mechanisms and processes which determine the practical impact of regulatory policy measures aiming to enable vulnerable youth to find and retain suitable employment. The main aim of the research was to gain in-depth insights into the social mechanisms and processes which determine the impact of innovative measures designed to facilitate entry and continuing activity within the labour market for ethnic youth and youth with disabilities. It was recognized that the limited size of the sample would preclude numeric generalizations of the findings, however, the central aim of the research was to gain a deeper understanding of the processes underpinning the adjustment strategies of employers and vulnerable youth.

Theoretical considerations

The outcome and impacts of the social regulation of diversity can be construed as the result of reciprocity between market actors (employers and employees/jobseekers) and public officials; i.e. the result of the dynamic interplay between institutionalized expectations (legal and moral duties), the extent to which employers manage to comply with, neutralize or avoid public officials’ expectations of conformity, and to what extent the youth groups manage to present and justify

claims for reasonable accommodation and to receive protection from discrimination. Ultimately, the outcomes of Nordic social regulation depend on the adjustments the actors in the labour market make to the situations in which they find themselves. With regard to Nordic regulatory policy instruments, their sociological effectiveness depends not only on how they have been designed by the Nordic governments, but to what extent actors in the labour market (employers and employees) define the regulatory policy instruments and innovative measures as important and relevant to themselves. This is not to say that employers can define the situation just as they please. Employers cannot simply ignore social expectations and legal and moral duties in the labour market. They have to take into account the constraints, actions and decisions of prior and higher-level political actors and how these shape employers' scope for discretion in implementing national labour market policy in their respective workplace.

As job applicants and employees, vulnerable youth need to “negotiate” with employers to achieve and retain employment (Strauss, 1978). Although vulnerable youth have less power than employers, as social actors they may adopt several strategies to defend and pursue their interests, to gain access to or keep paid work.

Barriers and bridges to the recruitment of vulnerable youth

Both in the case of minority ethnic youth and youth with disabilities, employers were concerned whether the job candidates would fit in at the workplace. Earlier research suggests that employers often consider “personal qualifications” or “suitability” as relevant criteria for hiring an employee. In the case minority ethnic youth, the concept is sometimes used as a generic term or euphemism for explaining why ethnic minority candidates do not fit in at the workplace. Employers have referred to assumed cooperation skills, flexibility, adaptability, honesty, punctuality and expectations to participate in social events outside work; e.g. going to a bar or attending the Christmas party. This suggests that employers use their prerogative to construct a difference between “us” and “them”, between personal qualifications and attributes assumed to be common among the employees at the workplace and others. The underlying assumptions about the community at the workplace may serve to exclude ethnic minority candidates from being considered qualified for the job, even if they have the same professional qualifications as the majority population candidates (Midtbøen and Rogstad, 2012; Tronstad, 2010, p. 35; Sandal, 2009).

One would expect that experience of discrimination or harassment would result in complaints by employees and claims for compensation to be paid by employers. Several of the regulatory policy instruments require that individual citizens or citizens groups publicly present claims to benefit from reasonable accommodation or positive discrimination, or for action to be taken against cases of discrimination and harassment, present complaints to the Discrimination and Equality Ombudsman, or even take legal actions in individual cases. However, as vulnerable youth are susceptible to criticism from the majority population they are concerned by the need to avoid conflicts and awkward situations with potential employers.

Some places, you just understand they are not interested. You can see it in the environment, it won't work. (...) I arrived early for a job interview at [a hardware store]. They talked Swedish. It was difficult to understand what was being said. I felt I kept saying the same thing all the time. In the end, I told myself, this won't work. (Woman aged 22, from Afghanistan, resident in Norway for 10 years, working part-time and attending ALMP, interviewed in October 2012)

In addition to conflict avoidance, the interviewees often stressed their efforts not only to improve individual skills but to adjust to what was considered realistic employment opportunities. In this respect the interviewees seemed to echo the recommendations of staff in The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Service (NAV), the integrated employment and social security agency, and other social services. Additionally, the interviewees often downplayed the assistance they had received from NAV. Given that the interviewees believed that they were doing everything possible to achieve paid work, they were in a better position to criticise public authorities for not doing enough.

While most interviewees accepted the importance of education and, for immigrants, language training, they also criticized the national educational system for not achieving its official objectives. Such criticism included complaints about barriers to a well-functioning meritocracy, lack of recognition of foreign third-level education, insufficient opportunities for immigrants to learn Norwegian, and barriers in accessing the labour market.

As regards youth with disabilities, Norwegian employers have defended themselves for not hiring more persons with disabilities by claiming that they do not receive applications from persons who explicitly state that they are disabled (Falkum, 2012). The legal opportunity for Norwegian public-sector employers to favour job applicants with disabilities requires that the applicant state that they have a disability in the first place. However, youth with mobility and sensory impairments and

youth with mental-health problems reported that their overwhelming concern was to be considered as *non-disabled*: strategies included not revealing the use of a hearing aid, masking the reasons for sick leave, or concealing their medical history. Several of the interviewees focused on reducing the importance of the impairment or considered it irrelevant for the kind of work they were looking for. While openness about disabilities, impairments or sickness could be seen as desirable, the interviewees considered it too risky due to the anticipated level of prejudices and/or stereotypical images among employers.¹

Few employers were aware of the affirmation action duty to promote non-discrimination in recruitment, working conditions promotion and protection against harassment under Norwegian law. To the extent that employers did recruit persons with disabilities to temporary vocational training positions they identified candidates through non-governmental organizations or the NAV. Such initiatives tended to be framed in terms of corporate social responsibility and compliance with the voluntary “Inclusive Working Life” agreement between the government and the social partners rather than legal compliance (Norwegian Ministry of Labour, 2010).

Reasonable accommodation for youth with disabilities

When asked about their experiences concerning recruiting employees with disabilities, the employers sometimes expressed more concern about the interaction between employees with disabilities and co-workers than their performance of the work tasks. In some cases the burdens for co-workers appeared to be of larger concern for the employer than the economic costs to accommodate disabled workers in the workplace. In other cases the section managers and co-workers found it easier to accept trainees with disabilities if they did not replace employees on ordinary employment contracts.

Several of the employers expressed more willingness and interest in the goal of accommodating in the workplace employees who were first assessed as having a disability after they had been hired. Some interviewee employers gave unsolicited accounts for their work to reduce the rate of sick-leave in the workplace so as to avoid the possibility of workers being transferred to disability

1. Due to obvious signs of difference (language, physical features and a foreign-sounding name) concealment or detachment did not emerge as an option for the minority ethnic youth.

benefit. Other employers emphasized that they were flexible and were willing to accommodate the needs of employees as long as it was compatible with their business strategy and objectives; e.g. flexible working hours, working from home, ergonomic and adjustable office furniture, elevator access, and “barrier-free access”. At the same time and vexing, some employers stated they did not aim at an active recruitment of employees with disabilities, but focused on employees being able to perform optimally in their work.

Other employers did accept trainees with disabilities that had been referred to them by NAV, but expressed less flexibility towards those candidates than towards employees who had worked in the enterprise for many years. In one case, the enterprise accepted trainees with disabilities (often mental health conditions) referred to them by NAV only after consultations with the employees; they would not accept any candidates unless they had the time and resources to supervise them. Both employers and co-workers defended such a stance, arguing that in some periods they were too busy and would not have the capacity to accept trainees with disabilities. An underlying concern was that employees with disabilities created additional work or required assistance with tasks which were considered too private, intimate or unprestigious; e.g. assisting the employee with disabilities to dress or buying lunch in the canteen.

Overall, employers and co-workers emerged as more willing to assume responsibility for employees hired before they acquired a disability than for disabled jobseekers. The latter population group tended to be considered the responsibility of public authorities and to fall outside the scope of the company’s social responsibilities. Through this reasoning, employers created or reinforced an insider/outsider division in the labour market for young adults with disabilities.

From the point of view of youth with disabilities, employers’ concerns about their work capacity or possible needs for accommodation tended to be seen as part of the difficulties in achieving and retaining paid work.

When I attended a second interview for a summer job, I was asked whether I was able to use a standard computer. If this had been a problem, I would have brought up that issue long before. From my CV, it was clear that I had previously held three jobs as executive officer. I was shocked that people look at you as different. It was almost like asking if you are able to use a computer because you are a woman. ... It was insulting, but I did not argue about it. You could have contacted the Discrimination Ombudsman, but who does that? To go to court is demanding. In the end, I was

offered the job, but declined it because I got a better offer. (Woman, aged 24, dexterity impairment, MA student, interviewed in April 2012).

In these ways, youth with disabilities experienced difficulties in maintaining and enforcing their legal entitlements to reasonable accommodation in negotiations with employers. Moreover, the employees with disabilities refrained from presenting their needs; e.g. one interviewee reported having avoided asking for accommodation, but used her personal lap-top to perform her work tasks, to avoid being considered a financial burden. Although Norwegian employers in certain cases can be compensated 100 per cent for costs incurred in accommodating disabled workers in the workplace, the interviewees feared a conflict with the employer and being labelled as a social problem at the workplace.

Reasonable accommodation for minority ethnic groups

In Nordic countries, norms concerning equality are so strongly embedded that employers are likely to feel uncomfortable about openly expressing negative opinions about minority ethnic youth. When asked questions on sensitive issues in the workplace, some employers may therefore have given the accounts they perceived to be the most socially acceptable. To the extent that real-world discrimination continues, this has the effect of biasing their accounts in the direction of politically correct, non-prejudicial responses. Nevertheless, available survey data suggest that Norwegian employers are more reluctant to hire minority ethnic youth (Midtbøen and Rogstad, 2012; Løwe, 2008).

Prejudice and bias are sometimes openly expressed by employers, often confrontational in form, and carried out with the blessings of society or at the very least condoned and accepted. More subtle forms of negative discrimination are found in a setting where employers and others give ideological expression to equality – where many have internalized that it is a social taboo and morally wrong to discriminate, and in consequence believe in and espouse egalitarian values. Yet, in this same setting, organizational practice and culture in the workplace continues to create and perpetuate positions of relative disadvantage for some groups, and privilege for others.

We do not have special measures for minority groups at the work place. We have had some requests for a praying room, but the employees have accepted it is not going to happen. We have not wanted

many special arrangements. Otherwise, we could experience conflicts between the employees. (HR Manager, public enterprise with 400 employees, interviewed in October 2012)

Given the fact that the culture of the majority ethnic group is taken for granted and accorded privilege, the minority employees have been expected to accept the larger and more visible presence of the majority culture in the workplace. In some cases, ignorance regarding minority cultures among management has hampered anticipation and the accommodation of special needs in the manpower plan.

In other cases, there has been a risk that employers' concerns with job applicants' language skills or spoken accent would be given undue weight in decisions about recruitment, temporary lay-offs and dismissals (Perduco, 2010). However, a couple of the employers had accommodated the different language skills among their staff. In one case, the enterprise purchased "voice picker" software in the 13 most common languages for their employees in the logistics department.² In another case, the HR department published a multi-language glossary with the terminology used by their enterprise.

Generally, the employers were concerned that employees should be treated "equally". Accommodation of special needs of ethnic minority staff was granted on the basis of the same rules as for other employees: employers tended to be flexible with regard to holidays and unpaid leave to celebrate religious holidays or visit relatives abroad, as long as it was possible to combine such flexibility with the needs of the enterprise. To the extent that the Norwegian employers adopted policy measures to ensure the reasonable accommodation of ethnic and religious diversity in the workplace, the accommodation was limited to individual rights and did not include collective (group) rights; e.g. individual opportunities to vacation during religious holidays for religious minorities, but not access to prayer rooms at the work place. Language and clothing were potential sources of conflict and tensions among the staff:

2. In logistic and warehousing work, the use of voice technology is increasingly used for "order picking", for locating stored goods for transportation and delivery. In practice, "voice picking" involves the use of a wearable computer with headset and microphone, by means of which workers are instructed about which items are required and where they are located, and the worker responds using the same voice technology once the task is completed.

It is not a question whether someone does not fit in at the workplace. Racism is totally unacceptable. But we require that they talk Norwegian at work. Otherwise there will be misunderstandings. If anything it could become a problem that ethnic Norwegians feel they do not fit in at the workplace, but it is not a problem today. In some nursing homes we have clusters of certain ethnic groups, for instance Filipinos. They talk Filipino in the staff room. Even though they know they ought to talk Norwegian, we recognize it is unnatural for them to do so when they are alone together. (HR manager, public enterprise with 3,800 employees, interviewed in November 2012)

The expression of concern about relations between co-workers can be interpreted as a concern for the “social construction of otherness” in the workplace; i.e. how ethnic groups perceive and interact with each other. An underlying concern was that if ethnic-racial categories (culture, skin colour, language) were mobilized and made relevant as a basis for social interaction in the workplace, conflicts could more easily emerge or have the potential to spark conflict if a triggering event occurred.

From the individual minority employee’s point of view, however, lack of recognition of the minority culture, or questioning of the legitimacy of the minority culture, was sometimes associated with experiences of harassment from co-workers.

I am the only Muslim at work. One of the other employees says that “Muslims are terrorists”, “How can anyone with a Nijab work at our place? It is not possible for hygienic reasons”. Our boss and the others do not say anything against her. I feel she is attacking me. But when I work, I only use the headscarf and trousers. (...) When I first read the newspapers and read all the comments about Muslims, I was depressed. Does everyone think like that? (Woman aged 28, from Somalia, resident in Norway for 4 years, working as a home help and nursing assistant, interviewed in November 2012)

Such conflicts were associated with the risk of early exit from working life to avoid further exposure to negative reactions from colleagues.

Comparing the negotiation strategies of minority ethnic youth and youth with disabilities

Several of the recent regulatory policy instruments require that individual citizens or citizens groups publicly present claims to entitlements to accommodation or protection against discrimination and harassment; e.g. to the Norwegian Discrimination and Equality Ombudsman or the trade unions. In the cases examined in this article, minority ethnic youth and youth with

disabilities benefited from participation in virtual networks and self-help groups in which they had developed skills and strategies (e.g. writing CVs, identifying job opportunities, self-presentation in interviews), shared knowledge, and developed their own interpretations which helped them in negotiations with (prospective) employers and co-workers. However, being vulnerable to criticism from the majority population, the interviewees were generally concerned with the need to avoid conflict, sought to downplay their contact with the NAV, and expressed demonstrative loyalty to the dominant expectations to achieve a formal education and paid work. This was especially the case among minority ethnic youth.

Youth with mobility and sensory impairments could more easily claim to be victims of negative discrimination (physical, organizational and attitudinal barriers to participation) and tended to frame their self-presentation in line with a social model of disability; i.e. societal conditions were considered the main reason why persons with atypical attributes (or lack of attributes) experience restricted life choices and are prevented from equal opportunities to participate in the market and other arenas of society. From a social model perspective, the lack of accommodation combined with prejudices on the part of employers and co-workers are considered the main barriers to participation in the labour market. As the interviewees had definite diagnoses, they could more easily claim that the barriers to participate in the labour market were created by others and they could not be blamed for the disadvantaged situation themselves.

Youth with mental health problems tended to a larger extent to frame their status in line with a medical model of disability. From a medical model perspective, the reduction in life quality and barriers to participation experienced by the individual are considered the result of a physical or psychological condition intrinsic to the individual. From this perspective, society invests resources in health care and related services in an attempt to cure the sickness, to expand functionality or improve the functioning of the individual to reduce the difficulties experienced in education, vocational training and the labour market. In keeping with this, the interviewees tended to present their health condition as temporary. Overall, youth with mental health problems were more concerned about access to social services than removing attitudinal and organizational barriers to participation.

Concluding discussion

Overall, the increasing salience of diversity has furthered a more complex mix of policy measures combining redistributive and regulatory policy instruments in Nordic labour market inclusion policy. While more regulatory policy measures have been adopted in the last decade, the emphasis remains centred on income maintenance, education and training.

The article has demonstrated that the Nordic countries have responded differently to concerns about public expenditure, financial disincentives for the individual to participate in the labour market, and the capacity of regulatory policy measures to ensure an inclusive labour market. The Nordic countries have all adopted regulatory provisions to enhance the employment prospects and opportunities of minority ethnic youth and youth with disabilities. Nevertheless we find significant differences between the countries both in the scope and implementation of the provisions. Of the Nordic countries, Sweden has adopted the broadest range of legal and financial provisions to improve the employment prospects of youth with disabilities and minority ethnic youth. Denmark has been the most reluctant to adopt statutory provisions to ensure non-discrimination and accommodation both for minority ethnic groups and youth with disabilities.

How does the legitimacy of ethnicity and disability influence the design and implementation of innovative public policies and measures to promote labour market inclusion? In a Nordic context, accommodation of ethnic diversity in the workplace has proved to be more controversial than accommodation of disability. While disability has been conceived as a result of biology, sickness, or accidents, many people tend to assume that ethnicity is a “chosen” status; i.e. that the person in question could just choose not to identify with an ethnic minority. According to this perception, people of indigenous, national minority or immigrant background could choose to assimilate to the majority by abandoning their own language and culture, regardless of their different background and visible traits like colour of skin and hair (Kymlicka, 2001, pp. 339-340). This perception has often been associated with blaming minority ethnic youth for maintaining their culture and/or with claims that it is unreasonable of minority ethnic youth to require accommodation in the workplace.

Target groups of welfare policy measures tend to be attributed rights and duties, benefits and burdens, dependent on whether they are conceived as responsible citizens making valuable contributions to society, as persons who are worthy of help and assistance from others, or as

immoral persons and welfare state scroungers (Schneider and Ingram, 1993). If a person is believed to be the cause of his or her own disability, policy-makers may view the person as irresponsible. In contrast, an external explanation for the assessed disability suggests nothing about the integrity or character of the individual (Mitchell and Kovera, 2006).

The relatively low public legitimacy of ethno-cultural diversity has influenced public policies to promote the inclusion of minority ethnic youth in the Nordic labour markets in three ways. First, it has been reflected in the reluctance among politicians to adopt regulatory policy measures and innovative strategies to ensure the accommodation of diversity in the workplace and affirmative actions and innovative measures to increase the participation of minority ethnic youth in the workforce. Second, it has been reflected in the reluctance to accommodate ethno-cultural diversity and in a lack of awareness about (often vague) affirmative action duties among employers. Third, it has been reflected in the reluctance among minority ethnic youth to confront employers and co-workers with experiences of discrimination, harassment and prejudice. In summary, both misrecognition by politicians and employers, and experience of vulnerability among minority ethnic youth have impacted upon the effectiveness of the regulatory measures adopted during the last decade.

Due to their larger degree of legitimacy, disabled youth with unambiguous diagnoses or physical impairments could more easily claim to be discriminated against. Minority ethnic youth and youth with mental health problems were better positioned to negotiate with public agencies about access to redistributive policy measures (education and training) than taking advantage of the regulatory policy measures particularly with regard to work placements.

Overall, this suggests increased attention to the implementation stage of the policy process is necessary to be able to assess whether seemingly novel or innovative policies represent true changes. While this article has not examined the policy outcomes, the preceding discussion suggests that more attention and research into the capacity of vulnerable youth to negotiate their opportunities for labour market participation is needed.

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