

Norwegian boys dislike school more than any other group, finds study

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For the most part, Norwegian girls enjoy going to school, whereas boys exhibit a marked dislike of the school setting. One of the problems is that boys experience school as unfair.

SINTEF has been responsible for the Norwegian part of a study that has been looking into how [school children](#) in grades four to seven experience their school setting. The study surveyed pupils in Norway, Spain and Poland. Pupils were asked about what they thought about their teachers and fellow pupils, as well as whether or not they enjoyed school and experienced school as fair.

The paper is [published](#) in the *International Journal of Educational Research Open*.

Norwegian boys say that school is unfair

Researchers found that the most significant differences were between the sexes, most noticeably between Norwegian girls and boys.

"For the most part, Norwegian girls enjoy going to school, whereas boys exhibit a marked dislike of the school setting," says Sébastien Muller, who is a Research Scientist at SINTEF Digital. "Norwegian boys' responses are also more variable than those from Poland and Spain," he says.

"The biggest differences are found when they are asked whether they experience school as fair," says Muller. "Norwegian boys experience school as significantly less fair than the girls. It's almost twice as likely that a boy will respond by saying that he believes that school is unfair," he says.

Even though boys in Spain and Poland clearly also view school as more unfair than girls, the tendency is far less pronounced than for Norwegian boys.

Compared with Norwegian girls, Norwegian boys also say that they enjoy school much less (boys' scores are 44% lower). Spanish boys also

clearly dislike going to school more than Spanish girls, while in Poland there is no difference between the sexes.

What Norwegian boys think about teachers

Norwegian boys also stand out by exhibiting the most negative perceptions of their teachers. Again, scores here are 44% lower than for girls. Nor are Polish boys overenthusiastic about their teachers, although their Spanish counterparts are not very different from the girls.

When it comes to what pupils think about their fellow pupils, responses from both boys and girls in Poland and Spain were quite similar. But once again, Norwegian boys stand out in exhibiting a marked negative perception of their fellow classmates.

Common to all three countries is that pupils' perception of their school, teachers and fellow pupils deteriorates as they progress through school. Here, Norwegian pupils stand out by exhibiting a slightly more positive tendency—their levels of dissatisfaction increase less with age than in Poland and Spain.

Worsening after the pandemic

This study was carried out for the first time in the autumn of 2019, just before the COVID-19 pandemic made its presence felt. It was repeated in the autumn of 2020, after the initial global wave of infection. The pandemic clearly had a negative impact on everyone's experience of the school setting, with an approximate 20% reduction in all scores in all surveyed countries.

Researchers were hardly surprised that stringent restrictions and long periods of school closures had a negative impact.

"However, we were surprised to see that the negative impacts were similar in Poland to those in Norway, even though Polish schools were closed for almost twice as many weeks," says Mari Gunnes, who is also a researcher at SINTEF Digital. "This shows that there were many other factors that influenced the impact of pandemic measures on pupils," she says.

In Norwegian primary and lower secondary schools, 75% of teachers are women. Does a [teacher](#)'s sex play a role in determining pupil satisfaction?

"It looks like it," says Muller. "In our study, we see that boys are more or less just as satisfied, regardless of the sex of their teacher. At the same time, it appears that girls get on better at school with male teachers than with women. There is a 34 percent greater probability that a girl will say that she is more satisfied with school if her teacher is a man. So, if we take the sexes together, we thus see a somewhat greater probability that pupils will enjoy school more if they have a male teacher," he explains. "For a larger proportion of boys, a greater focus on theoretical studies is experienced as being more demanding and less relevant."

School suits girls better

Schools Development Manager Kjetil Ulsrud Lundemoen at Modum municipality has been following implementation of the SINTEF study at five of the municipality's schools. He has his own views as to why boys see the school setting in a poorer light than girls.

"One likely reason is that a much greater proportion of pupils in Norway attend a fully integrated school system," says Lundemoen. "Spain and Poland, in particular, have special schools that take care of pupils with behavioral difficulties. I also believe that for a larger proportion of boys, a greater focus on [theoretical studies](#) is experienced as being more

demanding and less relevant. It's not that girls don't enjoy practical subjects, but they can 'tolerate' the academic aspects better.

"Fortunately, the pendulum is starting to swing the other way. For example, look at the findings from the evaluation of the Norwegian government's so-called six-year reform, or the grant scheme designed to promote a more practical teaching emphasis, as well as the introduction of new reforms to primary and lower secondary education," he says.

Why are boys' perceptions of unfairness so marked?

"I believe that there is a link here to disciplinary sanctions taken by schools and teachers in response to disruptive behavior and acting out, to which boys are more prone," says Lundemoen. "It's less common for girls to externalize so visibly and physically when they are frustrated. This enables them to be more resilient to their surroundings," he says.

Lundemoen also points out that boys spend a lot of time gaming and less participating in organized activities outside school hours.

"I think that there may be a mismatch between what boys get up to at school and what happens at home," he adds. "Perhaps as parents, we're too skilled at arranging things for them. Boys fail to acquire enough of the social and emotional skills they need to tackle the challenges and resistance they encounter in the school environment," says Lundemoen.

Need for targeted action

The SINTEF researchers conclude their study with a number of proposals.

"Schools must adopt a holistic view if they are to tackle the many factors that contribute towards a pupil's experiences of a poor [school setting](#),"

says Mari Gunnes. "We also believe that it is appropriate to target measures at certain groups of pupils, focusing especially on [boys](#) and pupils of both sexes in the upper grades," she says.

More information: Mari Gunnes et al, School climate during the COVID-19 pandemic in three European countries: A cross-sectional pre-post quasi experimental study, *International Journal of Educational Research Open* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ijedro.2024.100336](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2024.100336)

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