

The Multifaceted Challenges in Teacher - Student Relationships: A qualitative study of teachers' and principals' experiences and views regarding the dropout rate in Norwegian upper secondary education

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to enhance our understanding of teachers' and principals' experiences and views regarding the high dropout rate in Norwegian upper secondary schools. Our qualitative analysis, based on interviews with 28 teachers and 6 principals, showed that the teacher-student relationships over years had become more complicated since the implementation of a new educational reform in 1994, making the syllabus increasingly

theoretical and thus reducing the practical value for many students, especially those attending vocational programs. Limitations in students' knowledge and skills, engagement and academic interest, contributed to the creation of huge differences in academic levels within the class and thus reduced the quality of teaching. Also various other societal changes were identified as possible factors underlying the high dropout rate. Our findings suggest that better guidance regarding educational and careers choices, study program adapted to the student's own interests, and actively nurturing involvement may prevent dropout.

Keywords: teacher-student relationship, dropout, adapted education, psychosocial conditions

Introduction

The school dropout phenomenon is defined as “Someone who left upper secondary education before the final year or who remained in school to the end but failed to fulfill graduation requirements” (S. Lamb & Markussen, 2011, p. 5). It is a widespread problem throughout many Western countries and means lower qualifications, which is associated with poorer labour market outcomes, increased risk of unemployment, social and health problems and reduced tax revenues for the state (Neild, 2009). Studies have shown that students who had dropped-out generally did not have stable supportive adults when growing up (Ramsdal, Gjørum, & Wynn, 2013), they had lower grade point average (GPA) and higher absenteeism from the last year of lower secondary school, and felt socially excluded in the school environment compared with those who completed school (Markussen, Frøseth, & Sandberg, 2011). Many students also seem to develop physical and psychological problems because of the increased demands to academic and social skills in transition to upper secondary school. In a review about schooling and mental health, Gustafsson et al. (2010) found that the strong focus on good grades and constant competition between students for the best performance in the class,

is associated with anxiety, headaches, and serious stomach ache, even for high achieving students. This implies that the quality of education in primary and lower secondary school is very important in order to prepare the student for both the academic and social challenges awaiting them in upper secondary school. Interestingly, Nordenbo et al.'s (2010) systematic review about factors in primary and lower secondary schools that are important for creating a "good school" (where the "good school" was defined as a school with "high pupil achievement"), revealed the importance of the principal having a strong leadership style, above all in the areas of curriculum and instructions, being available and supportive towards teachers. Competent teachers who organized the schedule so that there was a good balance between teaching, instruction and pupils' work both at school and at home, improved pupils' learning. Moreover, early in the school year at a "good school" they conducted screening of students' academic level, to be able to help students with special needs, they focused on academic achievement and had high expectations for the students' work, while the students were enthusiastic, and the school environment was inclusive without negative pressure. Finally, Nordenbo et al. found high pupil achievement at schools that communicated and interacted actively with parents about children's homework.

In general, research in schools has emphasized that good contact and dialog between teacher and student nurtures a greater awareness of the student's situation, their needs and their potential as well as improving the possibilities for formulating individual educational goals (Berg, 2007; Nordahl, 2010; St.meld.nr.11, 2008-2009). Also good teacher-student communication promotes students' personal growth and identity building (Nordahl, 2010; Whannell & William, 2011) and the risk of dropping out is reduced when the student feels that there is a cooperative partnership with the teacher and the school (Christensson & Thurlow, 2004). Unexpectedly, in a meta-analysis Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, and Oort (2011) found that affective teacher-student relationships were even more influential for older students'

engagement and achievement than previously assumed in the literature. A good teacher-student relationship was most important for students with a disadvantaged economic background, students who performed academically low and students at risk for academic maladjustment. It has been emphasized that in order to be in the best position relative to the students' learning needs, the teacher has to demonstrate a capacity for caring and that they are actively and *passionately* committed to teaching and aiding learning (Hattie, 2013). This implies that a good teacher has the ability to adopt the perspective of each individual student and to design meaningful instruction leading to progress in the specific subject and towards attainment of goals in the study program.

In 1994 a new reform - that was more theoretically based than previously - was introduced in Norway. This reform ensured that all 15 – 16 year olds who had completed compulsory school had a legal right to upper secondary education. Reform 94 was a result of high youth unemployment caused by the economic crisis in the early 1990's, and an upper secondary system that lacked the capacity to accommodate all youths who applied for a place (Markussen, Frøseth, Sandberg, Lødding, & Borgen, 2011; Pedersen & Moilanen, 2012). However, even though 96 – 98 percent of every cohort leaving compulsory education after 1994 entered upper secondary education (Statistics Norway, 2013a), in 2011 only 57 percent of the cohort achieved general academic or vocational competence within the standard allocated time, as compared to an average of 70 percent in 25 other countries (OECD, 2013). The dropout rate is most pronounced in the three northernmost counties in Norway (Statistics Norway, 2013b). Therefore, in the present study we sought to examine this region specifically by interviewing principals and teachers from a county in this region, about their experiences and thoughts around circumstances related to school dropout. The theoretical framework of this study is based on the perspective that school dropout is a multifaceted process that starts before children enter school and involves a complex set of individual and environmental factors (Finn, 1989;

Markussen, Frøseth, Sandberg, et al., 2011, p. 264; Rumberger, 2004). Much literature relevant to the process leading to school dropout is based on quantitative studies with a direct focus on the student (Nordenbo et al., 2010, p. 62; Roorda et al., 2011). Therefore, principals' and teachers' subjective experiences and views on the dropout phenomenon may give us an opportunity to understand more about the challenges teachers face in meeting students at risk of dropping out of school. Simultaneously, this gives us a chance to learn more about teachers' experiences of building relationships to students, and how they feel that this affects the student's learning and social development. Moreover, this is an interesting opportunity to learn more about how teachers feel that classroom environments affect teaching and the relationship between teacher and student, and between students. This study was designed to find out what perceptions and experiences principals and teachers had had with dropout in upper secondary school, and to analyze what this can tell us about the challenges teachers are facing in school related to dropout. We hypothesized that the greatest challenges teachers had related to dropout was to motivate weakly academic performing students who had a difficult social background and to help and support them to complete their education. Furthermore, we assumed that these challenges would be greater in school classes with major academic level differences between the students.

Methods

We conducted a qualitative study in upper secondary schools using focus group interviews (Kitzinger, 1995) with teachers, and individual semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 2009) with principals.

Data Collection

We used focus group interviews because this has been shown to be an effective form to generate data, where we can obtain detailed experiences and perceptions from several participants within only one single face-to-face interaction, and simultaneously lead this

interaction into some specific issues that are settled in advance (Kitzinger, 1995). Weaknesses in this method are, according to Kitzinger (page 299), that disagreements and interruptions in the discussion as well as fears of sanctions later may hinder controversial experiences from emerging in the interview. In the current study, the first and second author participated in all interviews, alternating between being interviewer and secretary. An interview guide with open questions provided the basis for the group discussion (Appendix A). The interviews were between 60 and 120 minutes, and were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Most of the participants became more expressive and personal in their statements towards the end of the interview. To ensure the possibility of expanding topics raised in previous interviews, interviews were continuously analyzed (Morgan, 1997). To keep the group homogenous and thus strengthen the group dynamics, teachers and principals were interviewed separately (Malterud, 2012a). A brief interview guide with open questions was used for the individual semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 2009) with the principals (Appendix B), and interviews ranged from 35 to 70 minutes. The recordings were transcribed verbatim.

Recruitment

For practical and time-related reasons, the task of recruiting teachers for the focus groups was left to the principals at the individual schools, as well as we inviting the principals themselves to take part in our study. This approach can give rise to a concern about possible pressure to participate, conflicts of loyalty and a biased selection of participants. A letter containing the relevant information was sent to the principals, who in turn passed it on to the participants they recruited, thus enabling them to familiarize themselves with the project prior to the interview. However, the participants were recruited from a total of six upper secondary schools; three offered general study programs leading to a *qualification for higher education* (QHE), one offered vocational study programs leading to a *vocational qualification* (VQ) and two offered both QHE and VQ. They were situated both in urban and rural areas, thus

representing different types and sizes of schools with 100 to 450 students. To be included in the focus groups the teachers had to have teaching experience from the upper secondary level. All six principals and 28 of 29 teachers, who had agreed to participate, took part in the interviews – a total of 18 women and 16 men. The participants had experience from teaching 1 to 30 years in most of the subjects in the curriculum. After six focus group interviews and an equal number of single interviews, we found that the information gathered was sufficiently saturated for analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Since the rationale of this study was to increase the depth of our understanding of teachers' experiences and perceptions related to dropout, we chose not to include students from the upper secondary school.

Data analysis

The first author analyzed the data using systematic text condensation (STC) (Malterud, 2012b), an approach inspired by Giorgi (2009), who claims that the goal of phenomenological analysis is to develop knowledge about the participants' experiences and existential world within a defined field. The method is grounded in Husserlian phenomenology, for instance the idea of *bracketing*. This means that the researchers, strive to set aside past knowledge about the phenomenon being researched so that critical attention can be brought to bear on the present observations (Giorgi, 2009, pp. 89-93). According to Malterud, STC is applicable for analysis of empirical data from individual semi-structured interview as well as focus groups. The method involved four steps: First the transcribed texts and notes written down during the actual interview or afterwards were read by both the first and second author in order to gain an overview of the data. Second, textual units relevant to reaching our objective were identified and coded and placed in coded groups derived from the data. Third, the contents of the coded textual units were abstracted into a common meaning. Fourth, the refined categories were synthesized and the essential contents of the phenomena were formulated (re-contextualization). The analytical program NVivo 10 (QSR International, 2014) was used to

extract and sort meaningful units into code groups. Quotations supporting particular categories are indented and in parentheses referred to principals or type of teacher; vocational educational teacher (VET) and general educational teacher (GET). The findings were validated by systematically comparing contents and categories to the original material throughout the entire analytic process (Malterud, 2012b). Since data was interpreted within a scientific perspective to find the essence of meaning and not the meaning held by a singular person, respondent validation was not relevant (Giorgi, 2000; Goldblatt, Karnieli-Miller, & Neumann, 2011).

Ethical consideration

In terms of ethical considerations, all invited participants gave their written consent. The collected materials were handled anonymously. Detailed characteristics of principals and teachers have been left out to ensure anonymity. The study was approved by the Regional Committee for Medical and Health Research Ethics, REC North.

Findings

The analysis gave rise to the core category: “The troubled teacher - student relationship”. At the outset, this category was not a theme that was specifically focused on in the interviews, but as a result of the analysis it emerged as the main theme of the material. The last four categories are subcategories describing the implications of this challenging relationship more detail, and in addition, the participants’ suggestions for solutions to some of the problems associated with students dropping out of school.

1. “The troubled teacher - student relationship” (core category)

The participants expressed that the 1994 school reform and later revisions of it emphasised theory and had made the relationship more complicated between the teacher and those students who were not very interested in theory. Especially in vocational subjects it had become more difficult to get a good dialogue going, motivate the students when on some study

programs there could be up to 30 hours of theoretical teaching per week. A negative atmosphere within the classroom environment could easily develop when many students displayed little interest in the subject or willingness to participate in the lessons. Some teachers also maintained that it became difficult to make progress in the teaching plan because there could be large variations in the students' understanding of the subject. Such experiences were more pronounced among teachers at schools that offered vocational study programs, while teachers (often younger than older) with little experience from teaching expressed that they have had problems conducting lessons in such classroom environments. Also, the teachers often discovered that students who begun in upper secondary school had considerable learning, reading, and writing difficulties and lacked basic knowledge in the relevant subject matter. This could create frustrations among the students, which in turn led to disharmony, digressions and unwanted breaks with the lesson plans, as one said:

.../the teachers struggle with their relationship to the students, closeness to the student and tolerance. The teacher struggles to create closeness in relation to the student, in relation to the group, and in relation to the subject and the social situation (VET).

Many of the older participants with considerable practical experience in school stated that several of the students who had problems with school were students who in the former school system would have gone to sea or taken on practical work directly after compulsory school. It was maintained that over time education had become more theoretical with negative consequences for the less academically gifted and motivated students.

In the past the syllabus was not as demanding.../ I thought that it was much more motivating to teach, and the students were more motivated and were able to do it. I can hardly remember anyone who was not able to get through it and pass.../ There should

perhaps be more that's useful from a practical standpoint and less theory. And the theory there is, should perhaps be more relevant to the study program they're following (GET).

Several participants criticized the politicians for knowing too little about what is going on in school. In various ways, the view emerged that the decision-makers try to patch up a failed social project with short-term measures, instead of thinking about restructure education. One participant held the view that something was fundamentally wrong with the curriculum when boys, training to be construction workers, were supposed to analyze texts by the author Ibsen, more than they were learning how to build houses. The consequence of this mismatch was that after having received poor grades, or at worst not passing some subjects, the students felt devalued and were left with a feeling of failing. Another teacher formulated this view of how school alienated groups of students:

I believe that perhaps the Norwegian school system does not meet the needs of everybody. It's a school for the type of students who are idolized in a way, a type of student who resembles us as teachers. And many feel like strangers - quite simply. That may be difficult for us as teachers to understand since we may belong among those who perform well in a school setting (GET).

2. "The restless meeting"

Many thought that students with a lack of structure in their lives and poor working habits were often unmotivated and absent from school. Several of the participants experienced that students, especially males, were easily affected and distracted by things completely irrelevant to classroom instruction and learning. This could create restlessness and a lack of order in the classroom, making it difficult to maintain focus on teaching and learning. At a rural school located in an area with a long tradition of hunting and fishing, a teacher had used the schools' hunting and fishing equipment, and arranged hunting and fishing trips for some male students

who were especially tired of school. On these trips, based on the use of map and compass, hunting and slaughtering methods, relevant practical and theoretical subject matters were taught. The teacher maintained that this opportunity had prevented dropout and produced positive results which translated into more student involvement and effort in the classroom. These experiences were in stark contrast to another teacher's experiences with some of the male students:

They have a night and day rhythm of being up at night, and then they have to get up early and go to school. They are very, very tired and of course, then they can't perform at school. In other words, they're at school, but it's only their bodies that are there. It's very difficult to get them to do anything. They're sitting there, but are quickly distracted by other things. And maybe they're trying. But the urge to do all the other things that are much more fun is much stronger than doing your schoolwork (VET).

It was said that the emphasis of the media on celebrities and idols capitalizing on their talent without apparent effort, led many students to daydream and yearn for something being attainable without considerable personal effort. The participants knew that many of their students spent their free time involved in activities such as repairing old cars and building computers. This made teachers expect corresponding achievements at school. When these were not fulfilled, this could lead to frustration among the teachers, a young teacher said:

I have students who perform very well in their spare time. They are instructors at the cultural center or at the fitness center several nights a week. But when they come to school, they are tired and obnoxious and don't want to do anything, and oh dear me, whining and complaining!.../ That's the kind of social problem that can really take the wind out your sails! And I have asked myself why does it have to be like that? Yes, because school is unimportant, school is in the way only - I'm thinking inside the

student's world - a social arena, not an arena for learning. It's a place to meet your friends, and run off your mouth and have a good time in the cafeteria (GET).

These experiences contrasted sharply with the experiences from a school where sport formed a central part of the daily school life. To be admitted the students had to have good grades, as well as play sport at a relatively high level. Teachers and coaches worked closely focusing on individual students, which in part meant several individual conversations during the week. In these conversations, both goals and problems - large and small - were discussed. Sport and school mutually reinforced each other positively, it was said. Had things gone well in one arena, then it usually worked out well in the others also. Subject tests, midterms and final exams were coordinated among the teachers, in order to arrange things so the student was in the best possible position to perform well in tests and sport competitions. The principal at this particular school talked about parents who regularly contacted the school to find out how things were going both academically and athletically. In both principal and focus group interviews at this school, it emerged that the students' genuine interest in and talent for sport was used to create a good dialogue between teacher and student. Dialogue and interaction inspired academic learning as well, which the principal thought would have positive ripple effects at all levels in life:

.../this means that they have learned this business of adapting the ideas of sport to the everyday world of school, but also to their whole life - the twenty-four hour performer. When it's like that, you come to school, and you do your school work, and you pay attention. You are focused and prepared for what needs to be done, and then you suddenly have lots of time in the evenings, after training, for example. It's simply a question of energy, and you're riding the crest of the wave (Principal).

3. “About combining the role of the teacher with being ‘a significant other’ for the student”

Psychosocial factors, such as complicated family circumstances, poor mental health, low income and difficult housing conditions, could make it more difficult to support the student’s educational, social and personal growth. Several participants said that they often felt alone in their responsibility to help disadvantaged students, and that they would like to see more staff hired with the relevant professional qualifications in this field.

One thing is the fact that students who dropout often have a lot going on at the private level, parents who are divorced and new siblings. It is a tremendous struggle for them to relate to all of this. They bring this with them to school, and it affects their ability to concentrate a great deal. So they become depressed and feel very bad about it./.../ As teachers, we also do a lot of psychological therapy. But as teachers, we don’t have professional competence in that area (VET).

Some expressed frustration at not being able to get through to certain students. When elaborating on this, it appeared that these often involved students who were not very structured in what they did and who were generally low achievers, often with a record of poor attendance. Some of these students could be quiet and withdrawn with negative consequences for the interaction with other students and teachers. It often turned out that these were students who frequently had a troubled childhood with negative experiences with significant adults. One expressed the challenges the school system is facing as follows:

A student came into my office, and said that he had been abused for many years. In other words, things pop up out of nowhere. Like some jack-in-the box. And with some we don’t need to look to be able to tell. And with some we have a vague sense. Many are child welfare cases (Principal).

The teachers described how they had to use much time and effort to build a good relationship with - and earn the trust of some of these students, and several could gradually tell about much adversity and negative experiences with significant adults in the past. If one tried to get these students to perform, with the best of intentions, one might find that they reacted by withdrawing or simply by not showing up for class. One had to be patient with these students, it was said.

.../you must actually show that one understands the problem if the student hasn't done their homework or doesn't have their rucksack with them, and you get to know that the student had to help their younger siblings because the parents were fighting and were drinking. One must be able to show that one understands the situation, and adjust things a bit, to help and balance things. This helps to prevent dropout I think. The most important thing in life is not whether the student has done their homework (VET).

4. "How to motivate weaker students to do school work"

Participants, especially those who had teaching experience from vocationally study programs, expressed that it was problematic to differentiate the academic level of the teaching since only half the class could follow the regular syllabus. In order to get the remaining half working with appropriate materials, some had been forced to use basic texts from primary school level. It was a hopeless task to follow a common plan of education for the whole class. It would adversely affect the quality of education, slowing the progression of learning for both weak and strong students. Tests indicated that the payoff in learning for weak students was minimal.

.../ they lack the readiness in math, Norwegian and English from the compulsory school.../ These pupils struggle in automatization lessons when we are to make task

forms and connect to a motor control. If they struggle with the first task, then they struggle with the rest (VET).

Several participants mentioned that parents/guardians of the students who were in danger of dropping out, and that the school most wanted contact with, often did not attend meetings. Some participants felt that parents, often single, in their busy everyday life had difficulty organizing everything both at home and at work, and thus gave up and failed to follow through with homework and the high absenteeism of their teenager. It made it difficult for the principal and tutor to create a system that could motivate the student towards a comprehensive effort in terms of education, both at school and at home. Through the interviews it also emerged that there were major differences in the leadership of schools and how the teachers were followed up. The same applied to the monitoring of pupils' academic progress and procedures for monitoring absence. A principal said:

We have reduced the burden of the teachers - reorganized, so that only one person in the school is responsible for following up students who are absent./.../ The system around the students is comprised of predictability and routine. Students know that they will be caught if they slip away./.../ In maths we do a pedagogical differentiation between the students, but we have flexible levels. Fewer fail and actually more pupils get grades 5 and 6 (see Grading footnote 1) than previously - and it was not foreseen./.../ I am responsible for the supervision of teachers./.../ New teachers meet their tutors the day before the other teachers comes in the autumn./.../ We can visit classes, and then explain to the students that we are not there to see if they behave properly or if the teacher is doing their job. We are there to see how they are together. I think close monitoring is the alpha and omega of everything (Principal).

Teachers expressed that they liked their job, with busy days and many challenges. However, some called for more follow-up, support and guidance from management, while others expressed a wish for closer cooperation with colleagues.

/.../ there is no inspection of what I actually do in class, and as far as that goes, that would have been all right. There could have been other teachers with me in the classroom. Or school management could have been there to see what I actually do, and given me feedback, ok - this is good, and maybe you can do this better. I would like to have it that way, to be able to get advice about things (VET).

5. “The troubled transition”

At several schools, the principal and teachers agreed that many fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds were immature and uncertain about what careers they wanted as adults; thus the transition to upper secondary school could be troubled. The students were faced with a choice of an educational path based on interests and talents, while also keeping an eye on the prospects for work and housing after finishing their education. Several were critical of how instruction was handled at the lower secondary school level in the subject “Choice of Education”, which was designed to introduce students to reflect upon possible future careers and education. A principal formulated reservations in these terms:

All these small schools barely have a counseling function. And I believe they vary greatly in how knowledgeable they are about how the subject of “Choice of Education” should function, although there is a curriculum plan and all those things (Principal).

The participants were also familiar with students who had been uncertain about what course of study to pursue and for that reason had made *friendship decisions* in order to be able to go to the same school as their friends. Very often these students were poorly motivated for

school work, which manifested itself early in the school year in the form of slacking off, truancy and later dropping out. One said:

Some have, I think, quit because they have just been sent here because: You like to play football and be outside. But of course, that's not enough, because there is quite a bit of theory in this school. You have to sit quietly and be able to take in learning and study a little on your own (GET).

For students living in more sparsely populated districts and for others applying for a course of study not offered in their home municipality, going to upper secondary school often meant they had to move away from home and rent a room to live in. Generally the teachers said they knew little about how students living in rented rooms were doing during after-school hours. When taking attendance in the morning and registering tardiness, they could tell that students had often been awake during the previous night, and speculated that some students were partying during the week. The participants at the district schools were skeptical about students having to leave home to get the education they wanted. Based on previous experience, one argued for strengthening the decentralized school structure:

.../ one year we got eight or nine so-called 'resourceful students' back from schools around the country. They liked the school they were going to but could not handle living alone in rented rooms, so that was the reason.../ a mother said to me on the telephone: The worst thing is that he has to live in a rented room. It is destructive for him.../ He was not able to get up in the morning, he was not able to cook either, or to clean his room or to do his laundry. For most of them, it's just too much to handle too soon (VET).

Discussion

This study demonstrated that the problems of students dropping out from upper secondary education constitutes a multifaceted phenomenon representing a wide spectrum of

challenges both for students, teachers, school management and the system of education. The core category “The troubled teacher - student relationship” was a theme throughout the data. The implications of the relationship became more nuanced in four subcategories: “The restless meeting”, “About combining the role of the teacher with being ‘a significant other’ for the student”, “How to motivate weaker students to do school work”, and “The troubled transition”. In the following, we will discuss our main findings and their implications.

One central finding was that many participants, especially teachers at schools that offered VQ, were surprised that a significant proportion of the student population who begun in upper secondary school did not possess adequate knowledge and necessary skills. In fact, this indicates that students with various learning problems can complete the education in compulsory school without their learning problems being identified or remedied. In a way, this signals that measures from the beginning of this millennium, strengthen the training of reading, writing and mathematical skills for the weakest students in primary school, as stated in various Government White papers (St.meld.nr.20, 2012-2013) did not work as intended. When these problems follow students in upper secondary school, it seems that the issues surface because there are greater demands on academic understanding and progression in order to complete (Finn, 1989; Markussen, Frøseth, Sandberg, et al., 2011; Rumberger, 2004). Several participants relate this negative development to the introduction of Reform 94 which seemed to make the school day too theoretical and thus demotivate academically weak students. This lack of motivation made it tricky for the teachers to establish a relationship allowing the facilitation of teaching, and support of a *broad* academic, personal and social development. When participants claimed that most often these relational issues were manifested in the type of students who traditionally had started working directly after compulsory school, showed low engagement and performed poorly academically, this likely contributed to problems in *adapting education*. *Adapted education* means that the school has to take into account the student’s level

of knowledge and skills, and educate the student based on their abilities. We agree with Markussen, Frøseth, and Sandberg (2011) who state that “Pedagogical differentiation is not used to the necessary extent, and the vast majorities are treated as if they were capable of coping with the demands of upper secondary education” (p. 240). Many fail. Therefore, in a knowledge-based society, where education is a prerequisite for getting job and ensuring one’s own future, more differentiation or alternative practical courses may prevent dropout. However, the theorization of the school day - as our participants experienced - complicates their relationship to weaker student groups, and can be a part of the intensified commitment of common subjects (providing a broad-based, general education) since the 1990s, particular in the field of VQ programs in several of the Nordic countries (Stephen Lamb, 2011). This development has partly its background against technological innovations in the post-war period, the rationalization and the shift of industrial production and increased international competition, accompanied by an increased demand for more knowledge-based competence (Pedersen & Moilanen, 2012). A broad-based general education provides each student greater choice in education and career as well as facilitates a restructuring in a modern changeable job market that is becoming more individualized (Bæk Karlsen & Paulgaard, 2012). These changes have contributed to the fact that almost all youth look forwards upper secondary education, at the same time that VQ and QHE have merged and become an more integrated whole (Markussen, Frøseth, & Sandberg, 2011). Our analysis suggests that all these changes discussed above, together have contributed to *the troubled teacher-student relationship*, and also change the requirements of the teacher role. According to school research (Murray & Murray, 2004; Nordahl, 2010; Nordenbo, Søggaard, Tiftikci, Wendt, & Østgaard, 2008; Samel, Sondergeld, Fischer, & Patterson, 2011) the teachers’ relationship with the students is all to a large extent about the teacher’s ability to conduct good class management; the authority drawing clear boundaries, being clear and stable, being present and having expectations for the individual

students, as well as the commitment and awareness around to build up a good relationship with each individual student discussed further below.

A second important finding was that many participants experienced difficulty getting in a position to develop a good relationship with students who were not what the teachers described as *mainstream* students. Often, these were a type of student who showed little engagement and interest for school subjects, created unrest and noise, and took the focus away from teaching in the classroom. In keeping with past research (Murray & Murray, 2004; Murray & Zvoch, 2011), our findings suggest that it was particularly difficult to achieve closeness and contact with male students, especially in the VQ programs where the dropout rate is documented to be highest (Markussen, Frøseth, & Sandberg, 2011). Some teachers expressed a wish to focus on the specific subjects more than spend time on the social processes and relationship establishment. We will argue that an adequate investment in these relational issues will not necessary take too much time but rather lay the groundwork for improvement of the student's academic progression in the long term. This is in line with Murray and Zvoch (2011) who state that the quality on early adolescences relationship to teachers and other adults impact on academic motivation and self-esteem, and adds “/.../positive relationships/.../ have more positive emotional, behavioral, and academic adjustment both concurrently and over time” (p. 42), resulting in higher grades and minor dropout. Moreover, Aagre (2012) emphasizes that if one wants to succeed in building a good relationship with the individual student and creating a good class environment, the teacher in close collaboration with the students should search for exciting meeting points between the youth culture and the general knowledge material. A good illustration of this pedagogical approach in our study was at a school, where a teacher had success with integrating hunting and fishing in the syllabus. This is in keeping with Park, Holloway, Arendtsz, Benpechat, and Li (2012) who argue that learning contexts appear to spark students' engagement when they met students' psychological needs for autonomy, competence

and relatedness. Despite good results, our impression was that this initiative not was well coordinated and integrated as a part of this school's entire academic strategy, unlike the school where teaching and sporting activities were coordinated around the students' genuine interest and talent for sports. At this school the structure was open for constructive discussion of problems and objectives in terms of both academic and athletic progress. The members of this focus group agreed that this daily interaction prevented dropout and promoted the students' academic achievements (McNeal, 1995). A goal orientated school system seems to promote engagement, hope and academic progression (Van Ryzin, 2011). Placing emphasis on developing a special talent in other areas, such as sport and music, can prevent dropout, in part because systematic routines and good work habits carry over to schoolwork.

Third, some participants expressed frustration about their difficulties in motivating socially withdrawn and passive students for academic activities. Some teachers had experienced that despite their positive intentions to reach these students their attempts might have worsened their relationship. It is conceivable that some teachers' frustration is expressed by irritation when students with weak educational performance reject help, show low academic engagement in combination with poor social adaptation to the social class community. We find support for this view in studies showing that students with symptoms of anxiety and depression, compared to students without such problems, experience more negative student-teacher relationships as well as less closeness and more conflicts, more academic problems, and lower social functioning (Derdikman-Eiron et al., 2011; Drugli, Kløkner, & Larsson, 2011; Størksen, Røysamb, Moum, & Tambs, 2005). Thus, it would appear that without professional help boys will be the losers. Even though the prevalence of female anxiety and depression are higher in adolescence, it is found that the associations between symptoms of anxiety, depression and academic problems are stronger for boys than for girls (Derdikman-Eiron et al., 2011). In line with Drugli, Clifford, and Larsson (2008), we found that teachers requested more relief and

guidance from other professions with a health-related background, such as child and youth psychiatry services in order to better understand and address the difficulties these students are struggling with. Consistent with earlier findings (Undheim & Sund, 2008; Whannell & William, 2011), some participants in our study had experienced that confidential conversations with introvert students had made them more confident such that they felt more included in the class community. It was emphasized that this probably had prevented dropout in several cases.

Fourth, with reference to the large group of academically weak students, especially those with less teaching experience, claimed that they were put in a dilemma between making progress for motivated students according to the requirements of the curriculum, versus spending time and resources in guiding and motivating weak students. Often this led to frustration both for the teacher and the student. Our data gave no explicit answers to what learning methods were used or to what extent the students were involved and consulted with during the educational programs, but in other investigations it is reported that schools that predominantly use traditional learning methods with a limited degree of student activation often have higher dropout rate (Wiborg & Rønning, 2005). One of the schools in our study that offered pure QHE programs had - based on the curriculum and *the students' participation* (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2015) - organized pedagogical differentiation in some basic subjects. With close monitoring of teachers who specifically had been set aside time for this task, students were given an education in accordance with their individual abilities. After introducing these measures, the students' **grade point average (GPA)** had increased and the drop-out rate decreased, and equal elsewhere offering such individualized educational plans this had promote the students' engagement and academic progress (Van Ryzin, 2011). Our result corresponds with Nordenbo et al. (2008) review of studies about what characteristics of teachers have the greatest correlation with students' learning, who referring to (Meehan, Cowley, Schumache, Hauser, & Croom, 2003; Muijs & Reynolds, 2000, 2003), found that the teacher's professional

Kommentert [c1]: GPA er et utregnet gjennomsnit, men det som ble snakket om var vel karaterer i all alminnelighet

insight and educational actions, such as appropriate organization and dissemination of the subject, individual feedback and minimal time spent on administrative routines, may increase students' academic achievement by 10 - 25 percent and avoid the wide spread in the class. The principal at the school that emphasized student's participation had given priority to visit each school class, provide courses for teachers regarding new teaching methods and introduced a tight regime to follow-up students absenteeism, might have been success factors preventing school dropout.

Fifth, the participants' experience that students both had poor knowledge of the school system as well as the academic challenges ahead, may reflect a lack of communication and information flow between the educational levels in the transition between the compulsory school and the upper secondary school. We find support for this argument in the study of Buland, Mathiesen, Aaslid, Haugsbakken, and Bungum (2010) where almost half of the school counselors in the compulsory school report need for more competence in guidance of students, among other: the education system, VQ pathway, the labor market and its requirements. In keeping with findings in a Danish study (Grytnes, 2011) some of our participants described many students as immature, insecure and maladaptive, who regardless of interests and capabilities, to a small extent seem to reflect on educational choices and make what Grytnes denotes as an "unconcerned choice". Alternatively, maybe some unmotivated students should be advised to have a year of maturation in the form of work experience or a course or other work training. Further, the school in our study where sport was a central part of the daily school life seemed in many ways to be a school focusing on goals and the realization of potential talent. This observation correspond to Grytnes (2011) who found that students who were motivated and had ambitions actively exhaust the possibilities in the educational system during the process of making sense of individual aspirations. In our study, the student interview upon admission at this school was central in the mapping of the students' motivation for further study and career

plans. Also information about the school's teaching, activities and expectations of the student, may clarify the decision as to whether to choose this study program. The fact that these students to a large degree also had engaged and supportive parents, with expectations for their children to succeed in school, has in other studies been shown to protect against dropout (Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000; Markussen, Frøseth, & Sandberg, 2011).

Due to settlement patterns and long geographical distances in the northernmost counties (Paulgaard, 2012) the choice of upper secondary education means that some young students in outlying districts have to move away from home and live in rented rooms. Participants argued that many students may be immature and called for arrangements that can motivate and improve the quality of life among these students in order to ensure a better implementation of schooling. Investigations from the same region have shown that courses about how to live in a rented room, involvement of social workers and establishing meeting places after school time (Wiborg & Rønning, 2005) as well as creation of host families and a buddy system as part of the school's offerings may increase well-being and reduce dropout (Lie, Bjerklund, Ness, Nygaard, & Rønbeck, 2009).

The fact that several participants drew experiences from both the context of their present school, and from earlier work in upper secondary schools in other parts of the county, contributed to a broader understanding of central processes in dropping out. While many of these experiences led to good discussions and yielded interesting aspects around dropout, the modest number of participants makes generalization difficult. Moreover, inclusion of a purposeful sample of students in the study could also supply important empirical data.

In summary, several participants criticized politicians for knowing too little about what is going on in school, and claimed that the reforming of the school that began in the 1990s had theorized the school day and created school dropouts. Participants experienced that many students had learning, reading and writing problems as well as a lack of academic knowledge

when they began in upper secondary school. Especially in schools that offered VQ programs, this could create problems for teaching, interaction and made a negative atmosphere within the classroom environment. Conversely, in one school offering pure QHE programs they had organized pedagogical differentiation in some basic subjects, which had promoted the students' engagement and increased the GPA. Some teachers called for more follow-up and guidance by the school administration, as well as buddy systems for newly educated teachers. Participants' experiences with many students' lack of knowledge and interest for the study program problematize a need for better cooperation between lower secondary and upper secondary schools, as well as better competence in student counseling in lower secondary schools. Aspects with the psychosocial environments outside the school seemed to create an increasing number of difficulties for students' schooling. Most of the participants had little or no contact with students who lived in a bedsit after school time. Further studies focusing on students' perceptions and experiences about challenges in schooling may supplement the findings of the present study.

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Footnote 1:

The Norwegian grading system in upper secondary school consists of a scale from 1 through 6, with 6 being the highest and 2 the lowest passing grade (1 being fail).

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