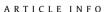# Dropout and early unemployment

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A B S T R A C T

Dropout from school and early unemployment represents increasing challenges in Western countries. In an effort to understand more about why young people in Norway drop out, we interviewed five men and five women aged 19–28. All participated in a national work-training program. The qualitative analysis revealed that most of the participants had experiences of abandonment, expressed academic amotivation, felt socially awkward, socially excluded and were lonely. They expressed little concern with being dependent on social services. They had different explanations of why they had dropped out of school and working life. While they had various combinations of risk factors, they all shared the experience of not having stable supportive adults present during their childhood and adolescence.
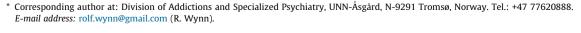
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1. Introduction

The world of work has changed dramatically in the last 30 years; totally redefining the competency demands facing the new generations entering the labor marked. Until the 1980s, young people without higher secondary education could still find a job at a relatively comfortable living wage. Today such jobs are scarce and often pay only half of what they used to do (Legters & Balfanz, 2010). The high school diploma has become one of the most important prerequisites in modern working life and without it young people risk poverty, underemployment and social despair (Kortering, Hess, & Braziel, 1997). Formal qualifications have become more or less necessary for permanent employment and participation in present-day society (Berggren, 2011). School dropout also represents a significant problem for society at large due to its consequences. Each dropout student represents a life time loss of tax revenue and increased medical expenses of approximately $240.000 (Levin & Belfield, 2007).

2. Developmental tasks

One way of understanding the well-being of young people who have dropped out of school is in terms of developmental tasks. The relevance of developmental tasks was established by Havighurst (1948/1972) and later confirmed through the synthesis between Erikson's (1968) psychosocial stages and Bowlby's (1969/1982) attachment theory. The conceptualization of developmental tasks has influenced contemporary studies of emerging adulthood (Roisman, Masten, Coatsworth, & Tellegen, 2004). Havighurst (1972) understood the process of living as a way of working through stages of development solving the imminent problems characterizing each stage. These developmental tasks are defined by society's values and

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depend on successful adaption in every stage. Failure to cope with certain tasks will lead to maladaption, increased anxiety, negative social responses and problems in coping with later developmental tasks. Within this framework, potential difficulties during adolescence and early adulthood are attributed to an inability or unwillingness to accomplish necessary tasks such as achieving mature social skills, achieving emotional independence of parents and other adults, choosing an occupation and preparing for it, and acquiring socially responsible behavior (Havighurst, 1972).

Recent studies seem to differ somewhat as to what constitutes the most dominant tasks of adolescence and young adulthood. Roisman et al. (2004) found the long-established developmental tasks of adolescence such as friendship competencies, academic competencies, and conduct-related competencies to be the most salient for well-being. While Schulenberg, Bryant, and O'Malley (2004) stressed the importance of succeeding in work and romantic relationships; they also found that for adolescents initially low in well-being, education compensated for not succeeding in work, and successful peer involvement compensated for not succeeding in romantic involvement. Krings, Bangerter, Gomez, and Grob (2008) found a shift toward developmental tasks more focused on self-realization and individual success in the younger generations; expressed through more individualistic goals and goals related to education. Thus, dropping out of school and failing to find employment may indicate problems in coping with salient developmental tasks relevant to the well-being of young people.

3. Educational resilience

Solving salient developmental tasks like self-realization, acquiring academic competencies, and preparing for work will include facing various challenges, and school completion is one of them. Winfield (1991, p. 7) described the challenge of school completion like this: "A student's decision to remain in school when he or she sees few job opportunities, receives no support or incentives, and experiences negative peer pressure is an example of an individual's resilience during a critical transition to adulthood".

Within the framework of resilience theory, staying in school and learning to cope with academic challenges in the face of adversity is referred to as 'educational resilience'. This particular form of resilience is often defined as "the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions and experiences" (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994, p. 46). Research has contributed to a better understanding of factors essential in maintaining achievement motivation, performance and ultimately school completion in the face of adversities. There are significant differences between resilient and non-resilient young people. Educationally resilient students show higher academic aspirations than non-resilient students, they show more school-involvement in the form of significantly higher attendance rates and time allocated to completing homework, they are better behaved, have better academic self-concepts, and get more praise and attention from teachers than non-resilient students (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009; Waxman, Gray, & Padron, 2003; Waxman, Huang, & Wang, 1997). Furthermore, school dropout seems to be the endpoint of a process where protective factors in the educational development of young people are absent or become gradually weakened or suddenly removed.

4. Academic amotivation

While the resilience perspective seems to focus on the identification of and interaction between protective factors, other perspectives focus on the underlying psychological processes. Lack of academic motivation (or, 'amotivation') seems to be a prominent problem for numerous high school students (Legault, Green-Demers, & Pelletier, 2006). According to self-determination theory, behavior is understood as initiated through intrinsic motivation (i.e. the activity in itself is motivating), extrinsic motivation (i.e., the activity is instrumental) and amotivation; an absence of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2002). Amotivation may occur when an individual does not experience a relationship between his actions and the subsequent results of these actions. Amotivated individuals will experience lack of control and autonomy and start to feel detached from important activities. Consequentially they invest little time and effort in these areas, for example in school activities. Academic amotivation seems to be correlated with boredom and lack of concentration in the classroom (Vallerand et al., 1993) and high school dropout (Vallerand & Bissonnette, 1992; Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997). This motivational deficit seems to be a result of four different classes of reasons: ability beliefs, effort beliefs, value placed on academic tasks, and characteristics of the academic tasks (Legault et al., 2006). Students' beliefs about their academic competence and capacity are inherently linked to their academic involvement, and, as Finn (1989) argued, individuals disengage from schooling and the academic domain long before they drop out. Lack of competence will lead to low ability beliefs, which in turn will result in poor achievement, low academic self-esteem, reduced school engagement, and eventually, school dropout (Legault et al., 2006). On the other hand, students are much more likely to succeed if significant adults openly value academic success (Astill, Feather, & Keeves, 2002). In fact, what *parents* openly value seems to have the strongest influence on children's success (Legault et al., 2006). Understanding the role of attachment in school dropout is therefore essential.

5. Attachment

Attachment may be defined as a deep and enduring affective bond between two individuals (Ainsworth, 1973; Bowlby, 1982). Children, express these bonds through characteristic behaviors like using the parent as a secure base from which they

can explore and expand the boundaries of their world, a base to which they can retreat for comfort when threatened or upset. Adult attachment behavior includes being attentive, emotionally and physically available and sensitive to the needs and signals of the child. A secure attachment supports the development of two functions important to school engagement; it provides the feeling of security making further exploration and learning possible; and it constitutes the basis for socializing children (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Bus and Van Ijzendoorn (1988) maintained that the development of literacy is directly affected by the quality of attachment, because the caregivers are the ones responsible for providing the necessary scaffolding dialog about words and reading. Englund, Egeland, and Collins (2008) identified individuals who followed expected versus unexpected pathways to high school dropout and graduation based on academic achievement and behavior problems. Their results clearly confirmed the importance of parent–child and teacher–child relationships for children's later academic success. Parenting behavior differentiated students who expectedly stayed on a pathway to high school completion from those who unexpectedly dropped out in spite of doing well academically and behaviorally. Pianta (1999) theorized that the quality of a child's early attachment will also influence the child's relationship to teachers. Referring to Vygotsky (1978), he argued that a child must learn to be in a relationship to be able to attend to the teacher and to respond to the relevant cues. Accordingly, studies have showed that close attachment to the teacher is related to better academic achievement (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Cadima, Leal, & Burchinal, 2010; Graziano, Reavis, Keane, & Calkins, 2007). And even though childhood learning can be accomplished through cognitive stimulation in many different settings, higher learning rates were observed only when one of these settings was the home (Crosnoe, Leventhal, Wirth, Pierce, & Pianta, 2010).

6. Research aims

Prior research has provided a number of variables relevant to the understanding of school dropout. In studies from countries all over the world, predictors related to socioeconomic status seem to be involved in explaining the phenomenon.

Norway however, is different from most other countries due to a relatively generous welfare state supporting all young people through the transition from school to work (Lundetrae, 2011). A study in Norway can be an interesting possibility to find out more about which predictors are relevant when ending up on the street or in utmost poverty is not a likely option. The subjective experience of young Norwegian dropouts thus gives us a chance to look at the problem from a different angle. Moreover, individual stories have the interesting quality of including the unexpected and the unknown; answering questions not asked. This study was designed to find out how ten unemployed Norwegian high school dropouts describe what happened to them in life and to analyze what these stories can tell us about the pathways to dropout.

7. Methods

7.1. Participants

Permission to perform the study was granted by Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD) in 2008. Participation was voluntary and participants gave written informed consent. All names have been changed for the protection of privacy. The participants were recruited through the local office of the Norwegian Labor and Welfare Administration (NLWA), which includes functions covered by social services, disability insurers, and employment agencies in other countries. NLWA selected a strategic sample of high school dropouts from their registered clients that were participating in a national welfare and work training program called The Qualification Program. The purpose of the program is to activate young people, motivate them for work or education and help them adapt to working life. The sampling focused on high school dropouts with long term problems with respect to participating in education or work. NLWA sampled what they experienced as representative individuals in this sub-group of young clients, including single mothers, individuals who repeatedly fell out of jobs and placements, and individuals who had been in foster homes. NLWA informed the potential participants of the project and the participants decided if they wanted to receive an SMS from the researchers asking for an interview. Of the 12 asked one had moved and one declined to participate. The final sample consisted of five men and five women, aged 19–28. One of the participants still lived at the parental home, while the others lived alone, with a partner and/or with children. They participated in semi-structured qualitative interviews in 2008–2009.

7.2. Qualitative analysis

All ten interviews were fully transcribed and analyzed in 2010–2011. Seventeen hours of audiotaped qualitative interviews constituted the data of this study. The data was analyzed using a qualitative methodology drawing on concepts from Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1992, 2001). The initial step of the analysis consisted of a detailed reading and rereading of the transcripts of the interviews – one transcript at a time – thus giving room for open coding and analysis before the next interview was assessed. The concept of 'open coding' involves describing "what is going on" in the data while keeping close to the original wording (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The next step in the analysis was to examine similarities and dissimilarities in the content of the open codes in order to elicit higher level concepts related to their dropping out of school and work. For example, we found that what connected open codes like "parents' divorce", "moving between foster homes", and "fathers moving away" were higher level concepts like "emotional loss" and "disturbed

attachment process". Each transcript was color coded marking the text samples representing the various concepts. Through constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of these related text samples within and between interviews, concepts formed clusters and categories started to emerge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For instance, the constant comparison of text samples coded as "emotional loss" and "disturbed attachment" elicited the discovery of the "abandonment" category.

Next, in order to describe the properties of each category more fully, the concepts and experiences assigned to each category were explored further. The content of the interviews was categorized throughout the research process. As new data emerged, the categories were further tested and refined until data saturation occurred (Gammon, Johannessen, Sørensen, Wynn, & Whitten, 2008; Wynn, Karlsen, Lorntzsen, Bjerke, & Bergvik, 2009), that is, until the categorization process did not give us new insight about the processes that led to dropout. As the research progressed, memos were produced summarizing findings and explanations. These memos were thereafter used to produce the six main categories we present below and to explore the relationships between them.

8. Results

Seven main themes emerged from extensive reading of the transcripts: (1) "Abandonment", (2) "Amotivation", (3) "Social awkwardness", (4) "Social exclusion and loneliness", (5) "Public autonomy and private dependency", and (6) "Explanations and interpretations of dropout".

These ten young people described a variety of life trajectories. Dropping out of school and being unable to find stable employment seemed to be associated with different kinds of life experiences. Even so, some main themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews.

8.1. Abandonment

Nine out of ten participants had experienced parental divorce or separation from one or both parents during childhood or adolescence. Anne was still processing the consequences of her parents' divorce. Her father remarried, moved across the country and ended all contact with her. Contemplating her loss she commented:

Anne: That was extremely hard. I felt I was replaced by a new family.

All participants said that their relations with family and friends were central to having a good life. But some indirectly described an absence of social support after their parents' divorce. The remaining parent was not always able to cope with the increased responsibility. Mary explained how the divorce left her without the necessary presence of adults at seven:

Mary: I was given so much responsibility looking after my siblings. So I never got to be a child myself.

Mary tried to get away from this responsibility and to find more adult support at 14 by moving to her father. But moving in with her father's family at this age was difficult and she moved out:

Mary: Well it was a bit special/.../being on my own that early./.../But I felt that I did not have any – I had no place to go sort of/.../Yes I was lonely.

Mary again experienced an absence of important grown-ups. Some of the male participants also told about moving between families and places but they did not word concrete feelings of loss and abandonment. Instead, they described problems they had during periods of separation. Bob commented on the problems he had moving across the country to his mother in early adolescence:

Bob: But I actually think I would have managed better in my hometown when it came to my weight/.../because I would have been more active then/.../Yes – I had friends there and all that.

Moving in with his mother's new family and bringing his "old problems" with him and leaving his friends behind, meant new challenges for both parties and resulted in him moving back to his father. Abandonment took various forms. Two participants did not live with any of their biological parents during adolescence. One was adopted (Mike), and the other one (Ruth) was taken care of by child services before she became a teenager. This is her description of her early and mid-adolescence:

Ruth: Yes – I lived in a foster home for two years and then there was one year in a home for young people and one more year in another foster home. Then I went to boarding school for one year.

8.2. Amotivation

When talking about their school and work experiences, two themes in particular generated some surprising answers. The first theme was expectations concerning education and work. The participants' own expectations regarding receiving a particular type of education or pursuing particular career choices seemed almost totally absent. Mary talked about her ambitions:

Mary: No/.../I can't remember ever having dreamt about having a particular occupation.

None of these young people had experienced parental expectations concerning their future education or occupation. Three of the participants, however, said that either their father or their mother had been nagging them about *getting* a job. The second surprising result was that most of the participants knew very little about their parents' occupations or educations. For instance, Mary said her father "maybe was an electrician". She did not know what kind of education he had:

> Mary: He is working as a – oh heck what is it called – I don't know if it is called an electrician or?

Similarly, when asked about his father's education Bob said:

> I don't know. He is an appraiser/.../I don't know.

The interviews seemed to indicate that neither the parents' education and occupation nor the participants' own future education or future occupation had been part of everyday conversation at home. Most of our participants described frustration and feelings of incompetence when talking about their years at school. More than half of the participants had experienced learning difficulties and/or low grades, others had been bullied, and some had experienced both. These experiences of defeat surfaced when they discussed their future career choices and the possibility of returning to school to get their diploma:

> Kenny: No/.../I hate school/.../It was no fun for a dyslectic to go to school.

The young men, in particular, seemed to lack academic motivation. Kenny explained his negative attitude toward further education as follows:

> Kenny: Knowing when you get up in the morning it is just to go to school, that just is not motivating enough for me.

Bob said he applied for high school to make his mother happy and he pulled his application a few weeks before starting school. He knew that his prior learning history had put him at a disadvantage academically:

> Bob: Too tired of school./.../No you know – I missed out on a lot in secondary school – so I switched to some kind of special class so we did not have regular teaching so I missed out on a lot/.../ well could have needed to make up for that.

Bob, like many of the others, communicated that he wanted to get a high school diploma, but due to learning difficulties and motivational problems, he was not able to accomplish it. Several participants described lack of concentration as their main problem in coping with classroom teaching. In their experience, real life situations worked much better than classroom teaching to stimulate learning. Mike described the following learning experience:

> Mike:/.../as I've said I like better to be out in real life/.../More like doing things with your body – that's when I learn.

After years of lagging behind in school, Bob, Mike, and Kenny finally dropped out. Staying in school had been painful but dropping out involved new forms of defeat. Mike addressed the emotional effect of putting himself in a situation where he ended up disappointing other people's expectations:

> Mike: I'm anxious about/.../ – you know my family and my friends kind of expect me to go to school and then I'm supposed to have an education at the end of it – right/../And then I don't make it.

Sometimes lack of academic motivation seemed to come second to what Marianne called "problems at home". Ruth had problems with authority, work routines, and absenteeism at school. She explained her lack of academic success like this:

> Ruth: Mom did not give a damn about what we were doing. So we controlled our own lives. And then I got into foster care. So I shirked school out of pure spite.

8.3. Social awkwardness

One recurrent theme was what can be called a "lack of social maturity" or a type of "social awkwardness". Many of the stories concerning their working life experiences contained relational difficulties. Kenny's working experience was one placement through school and six months in sales. When asked how he liked working he unhesitatingly answered:

> Kenny: That depends on how the bosses behave.

Kenny seemed to have an issue facing superiors, and coping with other people's behavior. He explained how his well-being at school depended completely on his relationship with the teachers. When asked about the importance of cooperation in general he described his reactions to behaviors he disapproved of:

> Kenny: I don't work with anyone who does not behave properly, I'd rather leave.

Marianne also focused on the relationships with other employees. Her general discomfort in social situations made her work during lunch hours and caused her to leave several placements prematurely. Once, she described her reasons for dropping out in more detail:

> Marianne: It was a bit – well I didn't like the people there. The job as such was all right./.../they just sat there drinking coffee and smoking and being men.

August was also uncomfortable around other people and thus dropped out of high school. Establishing relationships with colleagues at a new work place was challenging due to what he called "his personality". When explaining the challenge he experienced in social situations he said:

> August: It's partly due to my academic interests and because I am kind of asocial that people find me odd /.../I am no good at small talk/.../ And when I finally open up I can become quite intense and that does not make coming into contact with people any easier.

The interviews gave several examples of how the participants were socially challenged and forced outside their comfort zone during their first employment. These experiences seemed to play an important role in influencing them to drop out. However, sometimes the motivation to *keep* the job also seemed relevant. Although Marianne had several explanations for dropping out of her school placement in an auto repair shop, her concluding remark was:

> Marianne: And then I couldn't stand being there /.../And then it wasn't all that important to me that job/.../

8.4. Social exclusion and loneliness

With two exceptions, the participants spent most of their spare time alone at home with a boyfriend/girlfriend or a couple of friends and a computer. The two mothers spent most of their time with their children. Half of the participants explicitly described feelings of loneliness. However, feelings of exclusion seemed to be indirectly present in several of the other stories as well. August was the one who most eloquently worded his feelings of being an outsider. He explained why he preferred outsiders as friends:

> August: /.../those that I know are on the outside like me – there is no need to explain to them how it feels – because they know.

August said that the few friends he had made in primary school all had some kind of problem or disability. August described how these early experiences made him socially insecure. He became intense in the company of others and then:

> August: Yes, and actually rather defensive too because I have often felt inferior to other people – partly because I was treated condescendingly by many of my fellow human beings when I was younger.

Many participants described being bullied at school. Surprisingly, only Peter described bullying as his main problem:

> Peter: No – I was bullied a lot in primary and secondary school and up through time so – my psyche has not been the best.

Peter's early experiences with social exclusion seemed to affect his social life many years after the bullying had stopped. When asked about his social life at weekends, he referred to consequences of being bullied in school:

> Peter: I'm not all that comfortable when there are a whole lot of people around me that I don't know /.../It will linger for the rest of my life, I think. That's what they say anyway. But one gets to be alone a lot, that's a fact.

Bob was also bullied about his weight while in primary school and handled it by beating up the perpetrators and ending up in the principal's office several times a week. He described how he gradually lost parts of his social network, leaving him with a small network of unemployed single friends:

> Bob: but over the years they started to disappear, changing personality and stuff /.../ well most of them got a job, one got a girlfriend so he's gone/.../The two others that have jobs have totally changed personality/.../ So I don't like them any longer.

Bob found that keeping in touch with friends who got jobs or girlfriends seemed difficult in some way. The young mothers hardly had any social life at all and explained it with a lack of energy and social support in the form of babysitters. Mary said she got to spend time with her friends less than once a month, and said about her spare time:

> Mary: I don't feel that I have any.. and when I get home I'm so tired. When I've put her to bed – I feel I have no energy.

For Mary, loneliness was the result of not being around people, but for August it was about the lack of intimacy:

> August: The loneliness that makes me really sad is not what I feel when I'm all alone/.../ but the type of loneliness that I can feel in a crowd or at work or in a classroom where I feel that I have no one that I know.

Taking care of one's intimacy needs is a challenge in late adolescence and young adulthood. Moving away from the parental home often makes romantic relationships important channels for fulfilling these needs. However, only one of the young men had a girlfriend. The others did not mention girlfriends spontaneously, but when asked specifically all but one wanted to have one in the future. Mike explained the absence of a girlfriend in his life as mainly due to his drug problem but added:

> Mike: And then there is this thing about treating girls properly and I'm more like.. I couldn't care less...

Two of the young men did not think they could influence the process of getting a girlfriend. Peter was asked about dating and getting a girlfriend. He seemed to think of these processes as something he could not influence at all:

> Peter: No, I don't know – I dare not even think about it. No. /.../ That's the kind of thing that I would say is almost entirely random./.../I think that might have been nice.

Bob, too, was rather unsettled in his love life. When asked if he would like to have a girlfriend, Bob answered:

> Bob: Not now./.../Have to see when the time comes./.../But it won't happen in a while anyway.

Kenny, the only young man among the participants who had a girlfriend, said he was very dependent upon her. In this group of young adults, the women seemed to have more intimate relationships than the men. The women had boyfriends or children or both. None of the men had children and only one had a girlfriend. On the other hand, chatting, Skype, MSN and Facebook were important parts of social life primarily for the men. Peter, Bob and August talked about the social importance of the new media:

> Peter: I play online games and then I do get a lot of friends very quickly.

Peter said that when he needed to talk to someone about important experiences he talked to his mother and his friends online. He had friends all over Europe and had also visited some of them.

8.5. Public autonomy and private dependency

Nine participants depended on some type of public financial support for their daily survival, while one depended on such support only periodically. Nine had placements through the Welfare and Labor Administration and/or their wages were partly or totally paid by this agency. Nevertheless, only two participants spontaneously expressed a feeling of dependency. Several participants used expressions like, "I do as I please" or "I am my own man", when discussing whether they felt dependent on anyone. When Marianne was asked if anyone was helping her financially, she answered:

> Marianne: There are social care services of course /.../ they help me – it's not like.. I don't actually earn the money /.../ actually I've not thought about it /.../ that I depend on them.

This unawareness of her strong financial dependence on social services was typical for most of the participants. Marianne, however, explained her surprisingly relaxed attitude concerning her financial dependency with the fact that her friends were always there to help her out:

> Marianne: Because I've always lived with somebody, so if things fell apart they were always there and you know...

The participants talked about being "their own man" when at the same time talking about how the local office of the NWLA, parents and other family members gave various types of help that they depended on. Peter got a job for 12 months through the NWLA, and they paid 40% of his wages. He said he felt "95% in control" of his life. When asked what would happen if he had to provide for himself he seemed rather self-assured:

> Peter: /.../ nevertheless I'll manage with the wages I have now./.../ That won't be a problem./.../ I could even get a job back at the place I grew up and then borrow a flat or a house from someone I know.

The fact that he did not have a steady job that he could depend on keeping and that he had never fully provided for himself, did not seem to activate concerns about his future finances. The lack of realism in some of these answers was surprising. Only Kenny and Mary had a spontaneous awareness of their financial dependency. Kenny said right away that "technically" social care had a lot of influence over his life and thus there was "not much freedom really". Mary said social care was in control because they were "sitting on the money bag". Anne, on the other hand, focused on relations and social support and like Marianne seemed to think that when you have friends or family to turn to money problems will go away:

> Anne: /.../ if you have supportive people in your life that can get you through anything./.../ I feel that's what is most important. You know money, the financial part... that will be sorted out.

Anne had been provided for by her mother until she got a job paid by social care and was living partly off her working boyfriend. Even so, she did not express any worries about her financial situation. The thoughts the participants had about what constituted autonomy seemed multifaceted. On the one hand these young people seemed to think that their money problems would be sorted out for them. On the other hand, they seemed to think that financial independence was important. How they defined financial independence is of course crucial. Anne provided some insight into her definition when she talked about moving out of her mother's house and in with her boyfriend:

> Anne: /.../ being able to live on my own without being particularly dependent on mom – that is incredibly important.

Her new dependence on social care and on her boyfriend seemed to be conceived of as an increase in her autonomy. It is possible that to some of these young people being financially independent primarily meant not depending on their parents. In that sense, most of them were more or less financially independent.

8.6. Explanations and interpretations of dropout

One important purpose of this study was to understand how the participants explained important life events like school dropout and unemployment. Ruth had problems at home from a very early age and seemed to explain dropout as resulting from an interaction between external psychosocial factors and internal emotional reactions:

Ruth: And then I got into foster care. So I shirked school out of pure spite. I was going to show them that they could not improve me – just because they were snobs. They were so into prestige and I hated that.

She described exposure to difficult conditions and events that were out of her control. But she introduced a certain aspect of control in the way she reacted to these conditions and events. "I was going to show them" seemed to express an active and conscious choice. Thus dropping out seemed partly intentional. Kenny said that as long as he had teachers that he got along with, school was acceptable. When he did not get along with his teachers any more, he quit school. He thought the same about his bosses in working life. The problem of getting along with authority figures made staying on difficult:

Kenny: Because I would never accept a boss who would tell me what to do and then he walks off and sits down to drink coffee. Then I would walk over and help him stand up.

Kenny did not become explicit as to how much control he assigned to himself in these situations. It seems like he blamed what he experienced as negative authority figures. But when asked specifically about what caused his school dropout he said that "willpower" had a lot to do with it. Bob was not quite definite as to what stopped him but seemed to take some responsibility for dropping out, talking about lack of motivation and coping:

Bob: No – I don't know really./.../I was just fed up with school so I couldn't bear to go to high school./.../ I'm so totally fed up with school – I can't concentrate when I sit there.

Peter described how being bullied at school affected his mental state and prevented him from getting his high school diploma long after he had regained a satisfying social life. But when asked to explain his present situation in life he added something important to the story:

Peter: And then it was so easy to find some comfort in playing with the computer and being on the Internet./.../That's why my dropout lasted so long cause then I couldn't bear to get myself going again.

Staying out of school and out of work in itself seemed to have negative consequences like passivity and staying indoors a lot. Marianne described her hopes of a more active lifestyle when moving in with her new boyfriend:

Marianne: Now that I've got myself out of the sofa at my friend's house/.../then maybe I can manage to do something cause I've become so lazy from being indoors for so long.

9. Discussion

The interviews were performed to study how young people who had dropped out from high school described what had happened to them in life and what these stories could tell us about the pathways of dropping out. The analysis of the interviews resulted in six main categories: (1) Abandonment, (2) Amotivation, (3) Social awkwardness, (4) Social exclusion and loneliness, (5) Public autonomy and private dependency, and (6) Explanations and interpretations of dropping out. In the following, we will discuss our main findings and their implications.

Young people with a high degree of well-being are likely to have fulfilled a set of *developmental tasks* (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). These tasks reflect broad domains of competence in childhood and adolescence, for example attachment to caregivers, self-control and compliance, school adjustment, academic achievement, and getting along with peers. From the data and the analysis, we see that many of the participants have not achieved these developmental tasks. However, it would be unrealistic to expect consistent positive adjustment across diverse cognitive, behavioral and emotional capacities even in "normally developing" children (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000).

From our analysis, we were able to identify a range of factors which previously have been characterized as risk factors to different forms of maladaptation (Arsenault, Bowes, & Shakoor, 2010; Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Fergusson & Horwood, 2003; Margolese, Markiewicz, & Doyle, 2005; Størksen, Røysamb, Moum, & Tambs, 2005). However, many young people who have experienced one or more of these risk factors do *not* drop out of high school (Størksen et al., 2005). To understand how these particular ten pathways lead to dropout, the concept of resilience may be applied. The concept of resilience can be defined as "manifested competence in the context of significant challenge to adaption or development" (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998, p. 206). It may be used to describe the coexisting conditions of a threat to an individual's well-being and the evidence of positive adaption despite this adversity (Luthar et al., 2000; Luthar & Brown, 2007). Resilience then becomes a dynamic interaction between the individual, the event and the environment (Johnsen & Wiechelt, 2004). More precision may be gained by using terms to describe the nature of the resilience experience being studied, e.g. psychological resilience, educational resilience or cognitive resilience (Windle, 2011). The main criteria for participation in the present study indicate a lack of educational resilience. And the participants did describe experiences that clearly would qualify as adverse.

One central finding was that nine of the participants had experienced some form of separation from one or both parents while growing up. Living in single parent families implies a risk of economic disadvantage, reduced emotional support and supervision, and increased inconsistent disciplining (Amato, 2005). A longitudinal Norwegian study of parental divorce and adolescent adjustment (Størksen, Røysamb, Holmen, & Tambs, 2006) found a moderate but significant effect of parental divorce on all outcome variables related to adjustment and well-being after controlling for age, gender, single parenthood, socioeconomic status and parental psychological distress. The largest effect of parental divorce on children's adjustment was

in academic problems, and academic problems seemed to increase with age. However, the study concluded that there was a larger variance in all adjustment variables measured within the parental divorce group than in the no parental divorce group, indicating that only some children are affected negatively by divorce (Størksen et al., 2006). Protective factors include a secure relationship with either one or both parents, support from siblings or extended family, friendships, and a positive school environment (Colemann & Hagell, 2007).

To understand the pathways to school dropout it is necessary to look for processes or events present in the lives of the participants that could exacerbate the adversity of divorce and living in single parent families. Several participants told stories of abandonment, a lack of network and social support, or increased responsibilities at an early age. They were never explicitly asked about parental divorce or family history but these stories spontaneously emerged when the participants described their academic problems and everyday lives. When asked about what they thought caused school dropout none of them explicitly focused on divorce. But the absence of important adults in their lives and their experiences with separation from one or both of their biological parents were recurrent themes. Their stories described fathers or mothers moving away, making contact more difficult, and participants moving from one parent to another. Some non-custodial parents started new families and had little time to spend with the participants. The custodial parents were indirectly described as having their own problems adapting to the life of single parenthood. These processes gave rise to stories indicating experiences of rejection and loneliness. None of the participants described relationships with relatives, friends, teachers or other adults that seemed to have the potential to fill this void on a more permanent basis. For several participants, leaving home at an early age seemed to constitute the most recent in a series of premature separations.

A second important finding was that most of the participants did not have strong ambitions with respect to further education. Most of them had performed poorly in school, and they had developed low academic self-efficacy. They had hardly any knowledge about their parents' education or profession, indicating that academic expectations and aspirations had not been a topic in the dialog with their parents. Most of the participants were working class, and their parents had little or no higher education. It has been suggested that the influence of parents is crucial with respect to how children understand education, and that this influences their engagement in school and academic performance (Markussen, Frøseth, & Sandberg, 2011). If parents show a strong appreciation for academic achievement, their children will probably be motivated to try harder in school in order to gain attention, respect, and other rewards from their parents. When parents spend time discussing school with their children, they demonstrate their belief that the children have the ability to succeed academically, which may provide additional confidence and motivation (Crosnoe, 2001; Rutchick, Smyth, Lopoo, & Dusek, 2009). The stories of the present study indicated parental figures with little academic experience, coming and going in the participants' everyday lives, being distracted by other obligations, and thus making these kinds of parental discussions less likely. The extent to which students can see the value of the schooling process is a central factor in academic commitment (Murdock, 1999; Rumberger, 1995, 2004) and academic achievement (Dotterer, McHale, & Crouter, 2009). Indeed, students are more likely to succeed when significant others, especially adults and friends, openly value academic success (Astill et al., 2002; Finn, 1989; Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, & Pagani, 2008). The present study suggests that dropping out is – at least in part – a function of *academic amotivation*, i.e. a lack of recognition of the importance of education. Legault et al. (2006) pointed out that amotivation is a complex and multifaceted process that can be understood as a broad effect of unmet needs. Participants described unmet needs related to stable and secure attachment to parental figures. Attachment is important to school engagement because it provides the necessary security that makes exploration and learning possible and because it constitutes the basis for socializing children (Bergin & Bergin, 2009).

Thirdly, we found that many of the participants felt a type of social awkwardness, expressing problems with making friends or establishing positive relationships at work. The participants told us stories about various types of relational problems, including getting into fights, being obstinate, being bullied, being humiliated and excluded, experiencing loneliness, and social insecurity. The stories suggest two main types of social coping issues, namely confrontation and withdrawal. Most of the male participants seemed to be sensitive to potential provocation and responded aggressively and with open rejection. Externalizing problems tends to be predictive of low academic achievement over time (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Both the male and female participants seemed to have problems meeting new people and socializing in the work place. When confronted with new situations, some of them reacted by withdrawing into their private homes, remaining there for long periods at a time. While there may be diverse reasons for these relational difficulties, including factors such as temperament and personality, it seems clear that many of the participants lacked the necessary support and guidance most young people receive. Adolescence is a period of intensive development and change, a period for important choices about identity, education and work (Kroger, 2004). Meeting all these demands while gradually growing into adulthood, makes the presence of attachment figures, social support and good role models particularly important. Thus the participants' experience of long term separations from important models of socialization seem to have had negative consequences for their capacity to cope with relevant aspects of adult social relationships.

Fourth, several had been bullied at school and felt left out. Some had most of their friends on the Internet. The participants had experienced different kinds of social exclusion. These social hardships seemed to contribute to academic problems. In spite of his good grades, Peter who had suffered severe bullying could not cope with the emotional pressure of the final exam. August, who was academically motivated, could not finish his final placement due to his social insecurities. Kenny, Mike and Bob kept getting into fights, disturbing their concentration and probably their relationships with their teachers. Ruth, Mary, Leyla, and Marianne had difficult family issues to deal with that disturbed their socialization with peers, making school achievements seem irrelevant. The effect of social exclusion and loneliness in the peer group was aggravated by the absence

of stable supportive adults and close family ties, thus contributing to the atmosphere of abandonment in the stories (Luthar, 2006).

Fifth, while most expressed that they felt independent, they actually depended on financial support. None of the participants except Marianne seemed to discover or comment on this inconsistency. The conscious experience of their dependency on social care and family members seemed to be compartmentalized (Showers, 1995). Obviously, a lack of realism in this area could make change and planning for the future difficult. However, this kind of compartmentalization could also work as a defense mechanism aimed at protecting their positive self-concept. The feeling of being in control of their own lives is very important especially when struggling to master the developmental task of adult autonomy during late adolescence (Wray-Lake, Crouter, & McHale, 2010).

Summing it all up; the participants explained dropping out of school in different ways. Some described negative circumstances out of their control, but when asked directly, most of them pointed to a lack of motivation and actually mentioned factors they could control. Various combinations of factors give different pathways to school dropout. All the pathways seem to involve cumulative stress from an early age.

Present research on what causes dropout seems to indicate a large number of predictors combining into individual pathways. However, a recent study by Lucio, Hunt, and Bornovalova (2012) showed a cumulative effect suggesting that the presence of at least two risk factors puts an individual at risk for academic failure. This way of thinking is consistent with the developmental models focusing on the number of risk factors rather than the nature of the factors in predicting underachievement (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). The risk factors tested in Lucio et al. (2012) were academic engagement, academic expectations, academic self-efficacy, homework completion, school relevance, school mobility, positive relations and school misbehavior. All participants in the present study had more than two risk factors present. The combination of factors was varied, but what they did have in common was the accumulation of risk factors challenging their resilience from an early age and over long periods of time. And when self-efficacy and coping experiences are scarce, the need for support and guidance is extensive and the consequences of abandonment may be aggravated (Bergvik, Sørlie, & Wynn, 2012).

While many studies on dropout are based on statistical data or data from other sources, it is a major strength of the present study that we have been able to get data about dropout directly from people that have been affected, i.e. those who have dropped out from school or employment. These young people were given ample time to talk about what they experienced as important when trying to explain their own dropout processes. The interviews were semi-structured and thus suggested certain subjects as essential in explaining dropout. In spite of this limitation, the participants spontaneously brought up concerns of their own such as abandonment. While the data may shed light on central processes in dropping out, the small number of participants makes generalization difficult. The sample was strategic and contributed a broad range of dropout trajectories. The participants were recruited exclusively from the Qualification Program and therefore represented a particular subgroup of dropouts; those who struggle the most to get back on track. Further studies are therefore needed in order to corroborate the findings of the present study.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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