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Attachment problems and mental health issues among long-term unemployed youth who had dropped out of high school.

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Acknowledgements

Summary

Objectives

First, we wanted to explore how unemployed young people who had dropped out of high school and were registered at the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NLWA) would describe and explain critical aspects of their school dropout processes and what these descriptions could tell us about pathways to dropout and unemployment. Second, we wanted to critically investigate present knowledge on the role of parent-child attachment in school dropout processes by reviewing research on mediators indirectly linking attachment quality to academic achievement and school dropout. We wanted to focus particularly on research involving the Strange Situation Procedure (SSP) as the most validated measure of early parent-child attachment. To be able to relate such early measures of attachment to school achievement and school dropout we wanted to search for longitudinal studies investigating potential mediating mechanisms. We chose to concentrate on four mediation hypotheses suggested by Ijzendoorn and colleagues (1995), namely the attachment-teaching hypothesis, the attachment exploration hypothesis, the social-network hypothesis and the attachment-cooperation hypothesis. Third, we wanted to study the motivational experiences of unemployed youth who had dropped out of high school and were registered at the NLWA, by investigating what factors they thought pushed or pulled them out of school and what factors they thought contributed to keeping them in school. Finally, we wanted to study the role assigned to mental health problems in particular in these motivational processes and whether their motivational experiences differed from those of students who completed high school and graduated.

Methods

The methods of the present thesis were qualitative. In the first study, we performed 10 qualitative semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed using a qualitative methodology drawing on concepts from Grounded Theory. In the second study we performed a narrative review of studies investigating four particular mediation hypotheses linking parent-child attachment to academic performance and the process of high-school dropout. In the third study we performed 14 qualitative semi-structured interviews. These were analyzed using a qualitative methodology drawing on concepts from Grounded Theory. We also performed structured clinical diagnostic interviews, drawing on the Mini International Neuropsychiatric Interview (M.I.N.I), resulting in an overview of relevant mental disorders.

Results

In study 1, the 10 young people aged 18-25 who had dropped out of high school and who were not enrolled in school or employment and were registered at the NLWA, thus being off-track, repeatedly gave descriptions of absent or preoccupied adults in their lives, and how this lack of adult involvement had left them to solve their problems on their own. The participants also described more general problems with relationships in the form of loneliness, being bullied, struggling to make friends and finding experiences of belonging. Related to descriptions of feeling abandoned, there also emerged descriptions of a total lack of motivation. Their lack of motivation to engage in school was related to the absence of academic and occupational expectations, but also to their experiences with failure in the form of underachievement and social exclusion, leaving them in a state of powerlessness. In spite of substantial economic dependency on the NLWA, participants reported experiencing a high degree of economic autonomy. Their explicit explanations

of school dropout focused on their lack of motivation and willpower, although their general descriptions of the process focused more on the lack of adult involvement and problems with social relationships in their lives.

In study 2, we found that a large number of studies investigated possible indirect links between parent-child attachment measured by the Strange Situation Procedure (SSP) and academic performance and school dropout processes. Some of these studies investigated associations between early parent-child attachment and four potential mediating factors. Other studies investigated the potential link between these four mediating factors and academic performance and school dropout. However, only two longitudinal studies were found which actually tested the possibility of a significant mediation effect of parent-child attachment quality on academic performance through these four mediating mechanisms. Although these two studies did seem to support several significant mediators, substantial future research is needed before we can explain the association between parent-child attachment and school dropout properly. So far, however, a complex interaction between socio-emotional processes and academic performance seems to offer the best explanation of the dropout processes.

In study 3, the 7 students who had dropped out of high school and were not enrolled in school or employment and were registered at the NLWA, thus being 'off track' reported more serious symptoms of mental health problems during their dropout processes than the college students with high school diplomas. Moreover, the students who had dropped out qualified for a larger number of mental disorders than the college students. Regardless results indicating more mental health problems in the group of students who had dropped out, they had experienced less perceived social support. Those who had

dropped out described how this interaction between the presence of mental health problems and a lack of perceived social support contributed to more enduring problems with education and employment.

Conclusions

The students who had dropped out and were off track, described their problems with school engagement as closely related to their family situations, their relationship problems, their mental health problems and their lack of social support. The narrative review showed that research seems to confirm the influence of close relationships and early care on school dropout processes.

List of articles

1. Ramsdal, G. H., Gjærum, R. G., & Wynn, R. (2013). Drop out and early unemployment. *International Journal of Educational Research,* 62 75-86.

2. Ramsdal, G. H., Bergvik, S., & Wynn, R. (2015). Parent-child attachment, academic performance, and the process of high-school dropout: A Narrative Review. *Attachment and Human Development, Vol. 17, No. 5, 522-545.*

3. Ramsdal, G. H., Bergvik, S., & Wynn, R. (in press). Long-term dropout from school and work and mental health in young adults. *Cogent Psychology,* 1455365.

Abbreviations

AAI	Adult Attachment Interview
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
BQ	Basic Qualification
COS-P	Circle of Security Program
DSM - IV	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - 4th Version
GHR	Gro Hilde Ramsdal
HEEQ	Higher Education Entrance Qualification
ICD - 10	Manual of International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems – 10th Version
IQ	Intelligence Quotient
IWM	Internal Working Models
M.I.N.I	Mini-International Neuropsychiatric Interview
NEET	Neither in Education, Employment nor Training
NLWA	The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration
NOK	Norwegian Krone
NSD	The Norwegian Social Science Data Service
OAGN	Office of the Auditor General of Norway
OT	Oppfølgingstjenesten ('the Follow-up service')
QHE	Qualification for Higher Education
SES	Socioeconomic Status
SSP	Strange Situation Procedure
TSR	Teacher-Student Relationship
VQ	Vocational Qualification

1.0. Introduction

My interest in the school experiences of children and adolescents started when I was working as a school psychologist in northern Norway. This job gave me an opportunity to observe how some children at different ages struggled with their social adjustment and their failure to perform academically, and how these experiences seemed to negatively affect their academic motivation and their psychological well-being. A part of my job was to consult with high school students who had problems that affected their school engagement. These conversations made me curious about the lack of flexibility in the high school education system that these adolescents described. Later, as a psychotherapist in a mental health clinic for adults, patients often spontaneously shared their memories of school with me. I observed how patients lingered on these experiences, and how their reactions to these memories years later seemed to indicate that their academic and social failures in school kept influencing their present lives in negative ways. They described how social and academic challenges that they had never coped with during their school years later had resulted in rigid patterns of problem-solving, like avoiding all conflicts or completely avoiding further education.

Trained as a psychodynamic psychotherapist, my attention was also drawn to the early relationship experiences of my patients. I could not help observing their frequent descriptions of how parent-child attachment patterns repeated themselves in their recent relationships, thus influencing their ability to cope with present life challenges in education or working life. After years of practicing as a psychotherapist, I am still intrigued to discover how early relationship experiences dominate many patient narratives, and how these experiences seem to have influenced their relationships, self-

concepts, self-efficacy and mental health. Self-efficacy is defined as people`s sense of efficacy in dealing with their environment (Bandura, 1982).

In my present work at UIT – the Arctic University of Norway, I have taught bachelor students at the Department of Social Education for 20 years: some of them fresh out of high school. Others have not graduated high school, but have had a minimum of five years of work experience within health and social work. Teaching these students, I have come to realize that their giving up on school challenges at one point in time has not prevented them from later on developing new motivations, learning new material or adapting more successfully to the social context of the classroom. Consequently, for some, school dropout is a postponement of education. However, not all dropout students re-enrol in education or join the working force permanently. Therefore, there is a growing political concern with the relatively high rate of school dropout in Norway.

1.1. School Dropout

 In the five-year window between 2010 and 2015, 27% of Norwegian adolescents dropped out of high school (Statistics Norway, 2016). This means that students started high school but did not complete the three- or four-year high school program and were not re-enrolled in school during this five-year period (Markussen, 2011). Official statistics in Norway differentiate between students who graduate after completing three years, students who do not graduate after completing three years, and students who do not complete the three years within five years. According to Markussen (2011), only the latter category is registered as school dropout in Norway. Many other countries include both those who do not complete all years and those who complete without graduating in

the dropout category. Thus, there is no commonly agreed upon definition of what

constitute high school dropout. This makes comparisons between countries difficult

(Lamb, Markussen, Teese, Sandberg, & Polesel, 2010). However, dropout researchers

like Markussen (2010) and Lamb and colleagues (2010), found a common pattern

indicating that the graduation rate varied between 60% and 80% in the countries

included in their studies. This means that there is a group of 20-40% of the students that

were not educated to the preferred level. In the OECD countries, the average graduation

rate was 81% according to "Education at a glance 2011" (OECD, 2011). Norway was

number 17 on this list, with a 70% graduation rate. The other Nordic countries had

better graduation rates than Norway, and Sweden and Finland were above the average

81% graduation rate (Chaudhary, 2011). In Norway, the graduation rate has been

relatively stable for more than a decade, varying between 68% and 72% for the cohorts

of 1994 to 2005 and reaching 73 % for the 2010-2015 cohort (Chaudhary, 2011). The

latter is the highest graduation rate since recordings started in 1994 (Statistics Norway,

2016). Nevertheless, the dropout rate has remained relatively stable over the years as

have patterns concerning gender and educational programs. 78% of female students

graduated within the five-year time window compared to 67% of the male students.

Furthermore, differences are identified between the various studies, as 77% of students

in general studies program graduated compared to 58% of the students in vocational

studies. Finally, geography is also a factor of importance. In the three northern counties

only 55% of students graduated, making high school dropout a particular challenge for

this part of the country (Statistics Norway, 2016). Consequently, among the many

interventions that have been explored in the Norwegian school system over the years,

none seem to have had the broad and comprehensive effects that are needed to deal

with gender, geography and program-related patterns and thus to substantially reduce the relatively stable dropout rate (Lillejord et al., 2015).

Before we proceed to review the research literature on school dropout, we want to give a short description of the Norwegian education system. It is crucial to have some knowledge of the organization in which our participants had been enrolled, and to describe this particular part of their developmental context. The system can be divided into three levels: 1. Elementary school (ages 6-13), 2. Lower secondary school (ages 13-16) sometimes called middle school, and 3. Upper secondary school (ages 16-19) (NOKUT, 1917). Primary and lower secondary education is mandatory, and most such schools are municipal. Upper secondary education has since a reform in 1994 been a statutory right for all 15-16 year-olds, and 96-97% of every cohort enters this Norwegian equivalent of high school after completing the 10 grades of mandatory schooling (Markussen, Frøseth & Sandberg, 2011). Upper secondary schools are mainly public schools (in the American sense of the term), and 93% of the students attend these public schools (NOKUT, 2017). After 25 years of age, adults have the right to apply for secondary education for adults. The goal of upper secondary education is to qualify students for work or higher education. Thus, three-year programmes called general studies (3), emphasize theoretical subjects and lead to a qualification for higher education (QHE). The four-year vocational programmes (8) qualify for a wide range of occupations and lead to Vocational Qualification (VQ) (Markussen et al., 2011). It is also possible to achieve QHE by supplementing a vocational education. Accordingly, it is an official governmental intention to provide as many as possible with wither QHE or VQ. Consequently, leaving upper secondary school without it is considered a loss for society as well as for the individual.

Upper secondary schools in Norway are based on the principle of equal and adapted education. However, the meaning of equality has shifted from a focus on equality of rights to the equality of resources, and finally to the equality of results (Markussen et al., 2011). This change of focus mirrors the political struggle to break down the division in social classes through educational measures. Eventually, this process led to the understanding that teaching children from different backgrounds the same skills and providing them with the same chances in life, may involve treating them differently. Nevertheless, finding a way to do this successfully, and thereby reducing social differences, has proved challenging, and the dropout rate from upper secondary schools has been relatively stable since the reform of 1994 (Statistics Norway, 2016). The responsibility for following up on these young people who drop out of school is placed at the level of county administration. The task of the follow-up service, called Oppfølgingstjenesten (OT), is to offer all young people under 21 years of age some kind of education, employment or suitable activity. In addition, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NLWA) has been allocated a particular responsibility for assisting those not in school or employment (Riksrevisjonen, 2015-2016). The NLWA offers financial support and cooperates with the OT to assist those who drop out of school in finding work, re-enrolling in school or joining work training programs. Evaluating these services in the period of 2011-2015, the Office of the Auditor General of Norway (OAGN) reported that only one third of the participants who had dropped out of school had received a satisfactory assistance from the OT. They found substantial differences in the quality and organization of assistance offered to students in various counties, and pointed to difficulties in coordinating the services of the OT and the NLWA. Moreover, the report remarked that there was a lacking focus on measures aimed at re-enrolment in school for those who had dropped out and were registered at the NLWA.

The lack of coordination with other services like health care and child protective services experienced by most participants were also criticized. Concluding their report, the OAGN recommended a closer and more systematic follow-up of adolescents dropping out of school, by strengthening the cooperation between the OT and the NLWA, introducing better measures aimed at re-enrolment in school and emphasizing a more holistic follow-up by improving coordination with other services (Riksrevisjonen, 2015-2016).

"Education is the currency in the Information Age" senator Obama said in his Education Speech (Obama, 2008). Some politicians in democratic societies have strived for decades to ensure equal opportunity by offering all citizens the same access to education. This strategy was meant to equalize citizens` occupational chances (Arnot, 1991). However, not all citizens were able to capitalize on such equal opportunities, and as the demands for a more educated workforce increased, the social and economic costs of dropping out of secondary education continued to rise (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). Oreopoulos (2007) commented on this development, stressing the importance of knowing what students dropping out of school give up when we are trying to understand what influenced their dropout processes. He exemplified through estimates, showing that US students compelled to stay a year longer in school due to compulsory schooling laws increased their annual earnings by 10% (Angrist & Krueger, 1991; Acemoglu & Angrist, 2000) and UK students by 14% (Harmon & Walker, 1995; Oreopoulos, 2006). Other researchers have focused on other types of costs. Some point to the pathways between graduation and improved health, suggesting we reframe school dropout as a public health issue (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007). Others again find that keeping adolescents in secondary education lowers the likelihood of the adolescents` committing crimes or

being jailed (Lochner & Moretti, 2004). Finally, attention has also been given to the cost that may concern politicians the most; adolescents who drop out of school are more likely to require welfare and unemployment assistance and other kinds of social services than others (Rumberger, 1987; De Ridder et al., 2013). Accordingly, researchers have tried to estimate the financial consequences of high school dropout in various countries. In Norway, they concluded that if dropout and delayed completion of secondary education were reduced by one third, this would mean saving six billion (milliard) NOK for every cohort (Falch, Johannesen, & Strøm, 2009)

1.1.1. Quantitative studies

Due to a relatively low graduation rate, it has become crucial for the Norwegian government in general and for the northern counties in particular, to *identify* the factors influencing school dropout. Knowledge of what causes school dropout is essential for developing effective interventions and reducing dropout rates. Researchers trying to review the literature, however, find this identification an extremely challenging task due to the overwhelming array of factors that seem to affect school dropout (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Nevertheless, quantitative studies, seeking to identify predictors, do agree that dropout is a gradual process of disengagement. This process is influenced by many interacting factors, including student and family factors as well as school factors such as student composition, resources, structural characteristics and processes and practices (Finn, 1989; Janosz, Le Blanc, Bolerice, Tremblay, 2000; Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Markussen, et al., 2011). According to Markussen (2011), researchers in many countries seem to agree on four main factors influencing dropout: school achievement, family background, school engagement and school context.

As to the first factor *school achievement*, academic performance in middle and elementary school often predicts school completion and non-completion. Summing up 203 studies from the last 25 years, Rumberger and Lim (2008) concluded that early academic performance was one of the most consistent factors influencing school dropout. In a Norwegian context, researchers found that primary school grades were the most important source for individual variations in school completion (Falch, Borge, Lujala, Nyhus, & Strøm, 2010). The knowledge and skills that children and adolescents have acquired before they start high school seem to be among the strongest influences on the risk of dropping out. However, the second factor, *family background*, may strongly affect the kind of knowledge and skills children get a chance to develop. Families from various backgrounds may communicate different values to their children and have different attitudes to education (Bourdieu, 1977). Finn (1989) argues that middle class children come to school with knowledge and skills that help them succeed in classroom activities. Such school experiences may generate feelings of familiarity, belonging and self-esteem, inspiring motivation to attend school, focus on school tasks, and consequently improve learning and achievement (Finn, 1989). Finn (1989) claims that factors like school identification, school engagement and academic performance interact to motivate children's school- related behavior.

According to Rumberger and Lim (2008), researchers have identified at least three aspects of family background that influence school dropout the most: family structure, family resources and family practice. *Family structure*, such as the number and types of individuals present in a family household, seems to matter. Children having large families with more than five siblings or children coming from single-parent families or stepfamilies were more likely to drop out of school. In Norway, adolescents living with

both parents had a better chance of graduating high school than their counterparts

living in one-parent families (Markussen, Frøseth, Lødding, & Sandberg, 2008). Because

the divorce rate in Norway is 40, 2 % (Statistics Norway, 2017) many children live in

single-parent or stepfamilies due to divorce. Research on children with divorced parents

in general has suggested an increased risk of adjustment problems in childhood and

adolescence. (Størksen, Røysamb, Moum, & Tambs, 2005). As a group they have been

found to demonstrate lower levels of self-efficacy, self-esteem and social support in

addition to less efficient coping styles (Kurtz, 1994). Follow-up studies also found

adjustment problems like anxiety, depression, low wellbeing, and behavior problems

(Hetherington, 1993; Størksen, Røysamb, Holmen, & Tambs, 2006; Weaver & Schofield,

2015). Nevertheless, the *variability* in adjustment was greater in the divorced parent

group than in the non-divorced parent group (Hetherington, 1993), indicating that only

some children were negatively affected by parental divorce. Accordingly, children were

found to have higher risk of behavior problems when their home environment after the

parental divorce was less supportive and stimulating, their mother was less sensitive,

more depressed, and the household income was lower (Weaver & Schofield, 2015).

Thus, family structure may interact with *family resources* and family practice in its

influence on child development. For example, children from single-parent families living

with their mothers often belong to households with lower income than children living

with both parents (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). The amount of resources accessible to a

family seems to have consequences for the risk of school dropout. However, there is

disagreement regarding the effects of several family resources, like income (De Witte,

Cabus, Thyssen, Groot, & van den Brink, 2013). Some studies find that income in general

influences the probability of school completion and dropout; others find this to be true

only among Caucasians in the US, while other studies again claim that resources other than income are more important. In a Norwegian context, Bratsberg (2010) found a clear relationship between dropout rate and parental education. Among those who had parents without high school education, only 40% graduated high school within the maximum allowable statutory period of five years. In families where at least one parent had several years of higher education, 87% of the children graduated from high school within the five-year period, and more than 90 % of these were qualified for higher education. Family income also seemed to matter because an increase in average family income of 100 000 NOK reduced the risk of school dropout with 4.9%. However, this effect was significantly reduced when controlling for parental education. In line with these results, Bratsberg (2010) concluded that human resources constitute the most important part of family resources. Resources in this discussion imply means to promote children's emotional, social and cognitive development. Human resources include means such as parental capacity to help children with their homework, to inspire reading and influence academic motivation and aspirations. Many studies measure resources by constructing a composite index called socioeconomic status (SES) which includes several measures of financial and human resources like parental income, education and occupational status. Research on SES seems to confirm that in spite of disagreements on the influence of particular factors like income, there is an agreement on the importance of contexts and family background in school dropout processes (de Witte et al., 2013; Audas & Willms, 2001).

Family background includes the structure in which children are embedded and the resources accessible to them. However, this only supplies parents with the capacity or means to support development and academic performance. It is the *family practices,*

defined by the behaviors parents engage in, that help realize such capacities (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). An example is that students are more likely to succeed at school when parents (or other caretakers) openly value school achievement (Astill, Feather, & Keeves, 2002). Authoritative parenting (Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2009), secure parental attachment, or high-quality early care (Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005), all involve positive parenting practices and having access to such supportive family practices seems to reduce the risk of dropping out and to positively influence academic performance (Castro et al., 2015; de Witte et al., 2013). In addition, the impact of these supportive relationships seems to start very early in life (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Audas & Willms, 2001). Sroufe and colleagues (2005) concluded in their 30 yearlong study, starting in pregnancy, that the early care variable by the age of three predicted later school dropout with 77% accuracy.

In addition to school achievement and family background, Markussen (2011) argues that there is a third factor influencing school dropout that many researchers seem to agree on, namely *school engagement*. This concept is defined as the state of being motivated and actively involved in school: cognitively, emotionally and behaviorally (Reschly & Christenson, 2013). Engaged students identify with school values such as attending class, completing homework, exerting mental effort and participating in social activities both inside and outside of school. Studies from many countries, for example Canada, the USA, the Netherlands, and Island conclude that young people who identify with school and involve themselves with school are more likely to involve themselves in learning and completing high school (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu & Pagani, 2009; Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2014; Jimerson, 2003; Roeser, Wolf, & Strobel, 2001; Rumberger & Rotermund, 2013; Willms, 2000). Next to academic performance, student engagement in

the form of academic and social behaviors are the most consistent predictors of school

dropout and graduation (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Engagement cannot be directly

observed by researchers and must therefore be inferred and measured through

behavioral manifestations like attendance, effort, and expressions of interest and

enthusiasm (Rumberger & Rotermund, 2013). Despite these measurement problems,

several conceptual models of school dropout include the lack of student engagement as

one of the most important behavioral precursors to the act of dropping out. Moreover,

engagement sometimes seems to overrule other powerful predictors such as academic

performance. Even when students have good grades, a lack of engagement can increase

their risk of dropping out (Sletten & Hyggen, 2013). Through attendance, effort and

other manifestations of identification, engagement is involved in making children stay in

school, stay motivated and cope with adversity: by some referred to as educational

resilience (Waxman, Gray, & Padrón, 2003). According to Rumberger and Rotermund

(2013), some researchers seem to use the concepts of motivation and engagement

interchangeably, others seem to use engagement as a metaconstruct including

motivation, while yet others make a clear distinction between the two, relating

motivation to intent and engagement to action. Whichever of these definitions one

chooses to use, research suggests that motivation may have an effect of its own on

school dropout (Renaud-Dubé, Guay, Talbot, Taylor, & Koestner, 2015; Schoon &

Duckworth, 2010; Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997).

Finally, according to the literature, the fourth factor influencing school dropout is *the*

context in which education is taking place. This far, individual or social factors like

academic performance, student engagement and family background, have taken centre

stage in the research. In addition to these individual and social factors, there are school

system factors or factors within the educational system with a potential to influence school dropout (Halvorsen, Tägström, & Hansen, 2012). This perspective redirects our focus away from the individual and to the way society organizes its *system of education* (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Disentangling such system variables from more individual variables has of course proved to be challenging. Nevertheless, reviews often point to four school characteristics of particular importance to school achievement and dropout: student composition, resources, structural characteristics and finally processes and practices (Rumberger, 2006). Background characteristics of students defining the *student composition* in a particular school naturally matter to the individual student, but composition also matters at an aggregate or social level. Even after controlling for the individual effects, student composition seems to predict school dropout rates. Schools where more than half the students are social, ethnic or racial minority students (sometimes referred to as `majority minority` schools) are found to have a lower percentage of pupils progressing according to schedule from one grade to the following, a factor related to school dropout (de Witte et al., 2013). Some research on the school context, namely that focusing on the importance of *school resources,* has raised considerable debate for example concerning effects of student-teacher-ratio and class size on learning and school dropout. However, on the whole, Rumberger and Lim (2008) found few significant effects of middle and high school resources on dropout rates.

When it comes to *school structure* and the way structural characteristics like size, location and type of control (public, private) contribute to school achievement, Rumberger (2006) argues that these questions have generated considerable debate among researchers. He concludes that although schools have been observed to differ extensively as to student achievement, it remains unclear whether such differences are

due to the structural features of schools. Alternatively, student characteristics and school resources associated with structural features could account for these differences. School size is an example of a structural factor with both a direct and an indirect effect on school dropout (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Lee & Burkham, 2003; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). Nevertheless, de Witte and his colleagues (2013) argue that the effect of school size may be explained by the school climate; larger schools often seem to have a less positive social climate. Finally, there are the factors of *school policy and practices*. The literature suggests two ways of influence. Indirectly, school practices can promote overall effectiveness, strengthening student engagement and a general sense of cohesion, thus preventing disengagement processes and voluntary withdrawal as described by Finn (1989). Directly, practices and policies may include rules about low grades, attendance, behavior problems, age boundaries or exit exams that force students to leave school involuntarily (Rumberger, 2006). As an example, political party leader Audun Solbakken has argued that the newly adopted policy in Norway defining a 10% limit on school absence, may contribute to increased school dropout by forcing students to quit (NTB, 2016). Many school practices like social and academic climate, attendance rates, and teacher-student relations have been found to influence dropout and graduation rates, although clear tendencies or main factors are difficult to find (Rumberger & Rotermund, 2013).

In addition to schools, other contexts may be relevant to the dropout processes, such as neighbourhoods and communities (Audas & Willms, 2001). The interest in this kind of factors seems to be increasing. In Norway, for example, Markussen et al. (2008) found that factors like county and educational program had independent effects on the dropout process. Young people from Buskerud, for example, were more likely to

graduate after five years than those from Hedemark. However, the proportion of students attending educational programs resulting in QHE and VQ also varied among counties, and school dropout was far more frequent in the study programs leading to VQ. Thus, some of the variations between counties were explained by the fact that there was a higher proportion of students attending vocational education programs in some counties than in others. However, after controlling for other variables like study program, some differences in school dropout between counties still remained unexplained. That said, other community factors may also contribute to county variations in dropout rate, for example the pulling factors in the local labour market. Sletten and Hyggen (2013) reviewed research on school dropout and marginalization in adolescence and young adulthood. In their conclusion they remarked that the role played by factors such as the local labour marked in school dropout processes is not yet clear. According to research in the US between 1950 and 1980, students overall reported more dropout factors related to being *pulled away* from schools than being pushed out of schools, this being due to external contexts, for example being enticed by well-paid jobs (Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013). According to Doll and colleagues (2013)s, there was a shift towards more *push factors in later studies,* and students reported more factors like "could not get along with teachers" or "could not get along with students", consequently shifting the research focus to behavior problems within the school context.

Thus, when summing up their comprehensive review of quantitative research, Rumberger and Lim (2008 p. 67) concluded that "contexts matter", and that access to financial, material, and human resources together with access to supportive relationships in families, schools and communities are factors influencing the likelihood of dropping out. Furthermore, school achievement and school engagement were among

the most consistent predictors of school dropout. However, the influence of family background weakens considerably when controlling for elementary school achievement, indicating that prior achievement may have the most important influence on school dropout (Alexander el al., 2001; Audas & Willms, 2001; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 1997; Markussen et al., 2011; Statistics Norway, 2016). Hence, the effect of family background on school dropout seems to be an *indirect effect* through school engagement and elementary school grades. Research seems to support a mediating or moderating model where present school adaption and achievement are influenced by present and past family experiences (Janosz et al. 1997).

Consequently, Rumberger suggested that the "solution" to the dropout problem might involve "addressing widespread inequalities in the larger social and economic system" (Rumberger, 2011, p. 291). He claimed that improving the social capital of lower class children had the potential of improving their elementary school grades and eventually their school completion rates. By focusing on the importance of SES he acknowledges that there may be more to solving this problem than raising grades and increasing school engagement. Not all children with good grades and school engagement graduate, suggesting that other aspects of life may influence the risk of high school dropout (Bowers, Sprott, & Taff, 2013). Moreover, changing basic societal inequalities may take decades or more, and therefore will not help children already in school. Hence, research must also contribute knowledge that can be applied by school leaders, teachers, parents, students and healthcare workers in the meantime. To do this efficiently, we need to know more about what students themselves experience as the most urgent and immediate problems disturbing their school completion processes. Of particular interest to this research are the young people who have dropped out of school and are not re-

enrolled in school nor transitioned into stable employment, and thus constitute a subgroup of students dropping out of school. I will sometimes refer to this particular group as 'off-track' in order to emphasize that the experiences of participants in studies 1 and 3, differ from other categories of students that have dropped out. These young adults are, however, among those most at risk of social exclusion (Raaum, Rogstad, Røen, & Westlie, 2009). Thus, knowledge about their experiences might help us understand more about the particularities of these dropout processes.

1.1.1.1. *Nordic studies*

In 1994 an important educational reform was implemented in Norway making all students graduating from lower secondary education entitled to three more years of high school (Buland & Mathiesen, 2014). "Reform 94" laid down the structure of upper secondary education, establishing a vocational track consisting of two years in school and two years of apprenticeship at a work place. This structure in particular has been criticized for theorizing the vocational education and thus contributing to school dropout (Hegna, Dæhlen, Smette, & Wollscheid, 2012). In 2006, a new reform called "Kunnskapsløftet" ("the Knowledge Promotion Reform") again changed the content, organization and structure of upper secondary education aiming to include all students, granting them equal opportunity to develop their abilities, and focusing on the attainment of basic skills (Det kongelige utdannings- og forsknings-departement, 2004). Many educational studies in Norway have focused on the evaluation of these reforms. According to Markussen (2010), the evaluation of "Reform 94" in particular gave rise to studies including data on school dropout (Grøgaard, Midtsundstad, & Egge, 1999; Lødding, 1998; Markussen, 2000; Olsen, Arnesen, Seljestad, & Skarpenes, 1998; Støren, Skjersli, & Aamodt, 1998). The Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and

Education also conducted a study of school completion and attainment of competency during the 90`s (Støren, Helland, & Grøgaard, 2007). Another study evaluated "Kunnskapsløftet", following the cohorts entering high school during the new millennium (Frøseth, Hovdhaugen, Høst, & Vibe, 2008). The results from these studies are in line with those from another comprehensive study (Markussen et al., 2008), indicating that school dropout in Norway is explained mainly by four factors: students` social background, prior school achievement, academic and social engagement and identification with school, and particular context variables. These context variables were gender and geography. Boys were found to be more at risk of high school dropout than girls and students in the Northern counties including Finnmark, had a higher risk of dropping out than students from the south of Norway.

A variety of interventions have been introduced aiming to reduce the school dropout explained by these factors. Four types of interventions seem to dominate in all five Nordic countries: 1.Counselling and career guidance, helping adolescents to make good educational choices, 2. Enhanced focus on vocational education and practical training, 3. Establishment of alternative pathways in education with a particular focus on at-risk students needing extra attention (In Norway: Lærerkanditat-ordningen or Praksisbrev) and 4. Comprehensive reforms (Markussen, 2010). Although particular interventions like "Reform 94" have proved effective in increasing the number of students attaining upper secondary education, reducing the remaining dropout rates has proved complicated. For example, providing students with vocational tracks in the form of apprenticeships was meant to ease the transition from school to labour market and thereby reduce school dropout. The Norwegian apprenticeship system, however, was not found to increase school completion, nor did it make the transition into employment

easier for youth dropping out of school compared to more school-based programmes in other Nordic countries (Bäckman, Jakobsen, Lorentzen, Österbacka, & Dahl, 2015). The struggle to find effective interventions may partly be related to the fact that influences outside school seem to be of particular importance to the dropout rate in Norway. One recent study suggests that previous research of school dropout may have underestimated the importance of local labour market conditions (von Simson, 2015). Because re-entry into education is relatively easy in Norway, effects of local labour market conditions on school dropout were found to be stronger than in other countries.

The continuous focus on developing effective dropout interventions seems partly motivated by reports on the negative correlates of early school-leaving. The Young-HUNT1 study (part of the Nord-Trøndelag Health Study), for example, showed a substantially higher risk of long-term sickness and disability during young adulthood in students who had dropped out of high school (De Ridder et al., 2013a). This long-term sickness and disability disturbed their work integration in young adulthood, even for children raised in resourceful surroundings with good prospects. Adolescent health problems seem to be markers for high school dropout independent of SES (De Ridder et al., 2013b). Some researchers particularly explored the relationship between school dropout and *mental* health, finding for example that frequent attenders to school health services and adolescents referred to mental health services, were more likely to drop out of school (Homlong, Rosvold, & Haavet, 2017).

One often used categorization of problem behaviors in children and adolescents is that of 'internalizing' and 'externalizing' disturbances (Leadbeater, Kuperminc, Hertzog, & Blatt, 1999). Internalizing disturbances, include depression, anxiety, withdrawal, and

eating disorders. Externalizing disturbances include aggression, oppositional disorders, delinquency, and school problems (Achenbach, 1991). Some consensus concerning classification of childhood disorders has been achieved when exploring psychopathology on these two dimensions of dysfunction (Cicchetti & Toth, 2014). Thus, several studies referred to below have explored childhood and adolescent mental health problems using this dichotomization.

Adolescents leaving school early, for example, reported more externalizing problems while only girls leaving early reported more internalizing problems in the 10th grade (Sagatun, Heyerdahl, Wentzel-Larsen, & Lien, 2014). Furthermore, intervention and prevention strategies aimed at externalizing and internalizing problems were found to reduce the receipt of medical benefits in young adults (Sagatun, Wentzel-Larsen, Heyerdahl, & Lien, 2016). School completion seemed to be an important mediating mechanism for the association between externalizing problems and the probability of receiving medical benefits in early adulthood. Thus, making students complete school seems to have a potential for reducing the negative effects of early mental health problems in later life. One factor found to play an important role in the process of making children with mental health problems complete school is the teacher-child relationship. When students have a positive relationship with their teacher, this relationship constitutes a mechanism with a potential for reducing the association between mental health problems and school dropout (Holen, Waaktaar, & Sagatun, 2017).Thus, it raises cause for concern when the students with mental health problems in 10th grade reported less supportive teachers. However, students in general also seem to depend on their relationships, with teachers and with peers. Frostad, Pijl, & Mjaavatn (2015) found teacher support and loneliness in the school context to be strong

predictors of students` intention to leave school early. They recommended in particular working with social relations at school to increase school completion rates.

Summing up lessons learned from research on school dropout in Norway, Buland and Mathiesen (2014) concluded that reasons for early leaving are complex and multifaceted. School dropout, they maintain, is a process that starts years before the dropout event and that involves sharp decreases in motivation for large groups of students during lower secondary school. A further lesson learned, is the need to work both on a system level and on an individual level, while making transitions more streamlined and the educational tracks more flexible. In other words, the dropout rate is influenced by many separate problems. Nevertheless, Reegård and Rogstad (2016b) concluded their recent book on Norwegian dropout research by pointing out future directions and emphasizing the importance of listening to the adolescents involved, giving them a voice in describing and explaining the complex trajectories of the dropout problem.

1.1.2. Qualitative studies

Most research on school dropout has been carried out with a quantitative methodology. These studies have played an important role in increasing knowledge about dropout processes, for instance by identifying important factors contributing to school dropout. Some of this research has been discussed above. However, such probabilistic results are not necessarily representative of an individual's lived experience. For example, one particular risk factor may influence students in different ways (Janosz et al., 1997). The *effect* of each risk factor may depend on the various contexts surrounding the individual

student trying to complete school. Thus, there is a personal side to dropout processes that could be lost in quantitative research, and were qualitative research, such as the present study, might contribute with important insight. Hattie (2009) captured this as he concluded his studies on learning, and commented that because students themselves decide what they want to learn, we must also explore what students are *thinking.* Students` thoughts on and subjective experiences of dropout and learning might be most easily accessed through dialogues and qualitative interviews (Wynn & Bergvik, 2011; Wynn, 2004).

Furthermore, there is another argument for adding to the field of dropout research. Some researchers have claimed that quantitative studies tend to treat students dropping out of school as one homogenous group of students, indicating that students dropping out of school are stereotypical and characterized by low grades, low engagement, negative behavior, and coming from low SES backgrounds with low-engaged parents (Bowers & Sprott, 2012; Dekkers & Claassen, 2001). Only a small number of quantitative studies have identified subgroups, for example Janosz and colleagues (2000), who suggested four kinds of students dropping out of school: The Quiet, the Disengaged, the Low-Achiever, and the Maladjusted. This lacking awareness of subgroups may contribute to the problems with identifying at-risk students. For example, 40% of students dropping out of school do not show signs of disengagement academically or behaviorally (Dupéré el al., 2015). This may imply that there are still some important unanswered questions as to *how risk factors combine* to cause school dropout. Qualitative interviews are one way of studying such combinations.

According to the critical review on dropout literature by de Witte and his colleagues (2013), the complexity of the dropout phenomenon makes the inclusion of qualitative studies particularly recommendable. The association with meaning and values, and the involvement of interpretation and judgement in dropout processes ought to encourage the inclusion of qualitative data in research. However, there are surprisingly few studies in the international dropout literature presenting qualitative data. Among the studies found, several focus on students at risk of dropping out of school. Knesting (2008), for example, interviewed 17 at-risk students still attending school to gain an understanding of their persistence. In interviews, they described the importance of teachers listening to their students. The at-risk students explained how they needed educators to actively seek out their opinions, ask how they were doing, and explore why they wanted to leave. Their major complaint, was teachers and administrators being disrespectful and communicating a lack of caring. Caring adults, they said, made a difference to their intention to stay in school. In another study of at-risk students, goal orientation was a main theme (Knesting & Waldron, 2006). Students struggled to believe that graduation from high school would lead to positive results such as a better life and financial independence. Secondly, they reported that *coming* to school and deciding to follow school rules were core factors in their persistence. Finally, they described how the presence of supporting adults at home and in school was essential in keeping them in school, more important than specific school programs. Analyzing interviews with at-risk students, Lagana-Riordan and her colleagues (2011) also found relationships to be a core factor in their persistence.

In line with these results on the importance of relationships, the "caring teacher" is a reappearing core factor in several interview studies (Hardy-Fortin, 2012; Patterson,

Hale, & Stessman, 2008). The "caring teacher" is a teacher who is willing to help, and at the same time never loses sight of the necessity of holding his or her students to high standards and persistently refuses to give up on them. Hispanic and Black American at-risk students and students who had dropped out, described experiences with uncaring teachers who did not like them or did not believe in their ability to succeed in education (Bell, 2014; Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Hondo, Gardiner, & Sapien, 2008; Nesman, 2007). These students perceived the negative teacher attitudes as related to racial prejudice but remarked that there was "no help" for students who struggled academically thus indicating such lack of help to be a more general phenomenon and not always related to minority status or race. Teachers did not really teach those lagging behind academically, they were left to fend for themselves. Comparing high-and low-risk Hispanic students, Reyes and Jason (1997) found that although both groups criticized teachers for their unfair treatment of students, their perceptions were still somewhat discrepant. They suggested that this discrepancy was what made the low-risk group overcome the negative aspects of their experiences with school. The researchers argue that the low-risk students were more willing to follow rules and procedures at school. The increased sense of satisfaction resulting from such behavior may have enabled them to overcome their negative school experiences. Overcoming such negative experiences with teachers the persistent students seemed to be more resilient. Resilience is defined as "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress (para.4)" (American Psychological Association, 2014). The resilience process can be seen as a continuum and the place of the individual on this continuum depend on the support systems available and the challenges confronted at a particular time (Jakobsen, 2010). Persistent students demonstrated an ability to plan, anticipate, make sound choices, and set limits (Lessard, Butler-Kisber, Fortin, &

Marcotte, 2014). Through their positive relationship experiences they learned to ask for help, and thus established stable networks to rely on in crises. In these relationships, they also learned to capitalize on their psychological, emotional and relational resources. Hence, they developed a fundamental belief in their own abilities and their capacity to cope with challenges, also called 'self-efficacy' (Lessard et al., 2014). In this particular study, the students who had dropped out did not demonstrate this kind of self-efficacy. They, on the other hand, reported unrealistic expectations and no tangible plans for the future. Several studies have suggested that low self-efficacy is a core contributor in demotivation and dropout processes (Hondo et al., 2008; Smyth & Hattam, 2015). Hondo and colleagues (2008) describe that the student voices in their study were talking about their failed struggles to become someone and develop a positive identity in school. Interviewing students with learning disabilities in particular, three key findings appeared noteworthy according to Kortering and Braziel (1999). First, the answers implied that educators needed to change their attitude and behavior with these students and provide more positive encounters between teachers and students. Secondly the students offered suggestions for personal changes, especially concerning effort and attitude. "Trying harder", "raising one`s goals" and "not get into trouble" were the most frequent suggestions. Finally, they wanted better support from school and family.

1.1.2.1. Nordic studies

The Nordic countries have contributed several qualitative studies on school dropout. One of them was conducted in the county of Nordland. Young people, 15-25 years of age, struggling with school, work, or family problems were interviewed about their experiences. The participants were all considered to be at risk; some because they might

drop out of school, and some because they had dropped out of school or work (Follesø, 2011). When talking about their experiences of being at risk, they talked about how they felt, and described the risk as something they *were.* They talked about how low self-esteem made coping with school and work difficult, and about *feelings* like loneliness, anger, and despair in addition to feeling insignificant and unrecognized. In teacher interviews, the teachers described the risk as behaviors, something young people *did*: like absenteeism, withdrawal, drug use and breaking the law. Other studies have reported students who dropped out describing themselves as invisible both at home and at school (Natland & Rasmussen, 2012). These participants could not remember much about school, and focused more on stories about how they grew up and about their family relations. This emphasis on family relations was also evident in a Danish study of 15-25 years at-risk individuals, dropping out of school and work (Gørlich, Pless, Katznelson, & Olsen, 2011). Coming from homes characterized by instability, their stories emphasized negative academic self-concepts making educational choices overwhelming and confusing. They also described lives dominated by psychological vulnerability and social problems. Some of the same themes emerged in a study of Norwegians15-25 years of age (Thrana, Anvik, Bliksvær, & Handegård, 2009). These young people had dropped out of regular education or employment. When interviewed about their experiences with marginalization they focused on the importance of their family situation. They described how instability in the form of changing family constellations, high mobility and paternal absence was an important factor in generating problems in their lives. This kind of discontinuity descriptions were combined with descriptions of relationship problems they experienced in their peer group. The same kind of instability descriptions emerge in a study by Anvik and Gustavsen (2012). They interviewed youths between 22-27 years of age in vulnerable life situations about their

experiences with mental health problems and education. They found that common elements in these stories about growing up was high mobility, experiences of being bullied, being lonely, and experiencing chaos and unrest.

Moreover, among those who had dropped out of school, most of the participants reported that mental health problems had influenced their decision to leave prematurely. One study focused the importance of teacher-child relationships (TSR) in school dropout. The researchers had interviewed young people 16-20 years old, who either had lived the experience of being at risk of school dropout or had known someone at risk of dropping out (Krane, Ness, Holter-Sorensen, Karlsson & Binder, 2016). The participants reported that in their experience five qualities of TSR were of particular importance to students` mental health and school dropout: First, the students reported that TSR must be mutual and characterized by the key ingredients of mutual responsibility and respect. Second, negative experiences with teachers challenge TSR. Third, students value the opportunity to bond and solve problems through conversations with their teachers. Fourth, students find teachers who helped them with individual academic and personal needs to be more helpful and fifth teachers must have a positive demeanour to inspire engagement.

The complexity of the individual dropout processes emerged clearly in a qualitative 13 year prospective follow-up study from the Nordic countries (Wrede-Jäntti, 2010). As in the other in-depth interview studies, an important finding was the diversity of life stories and factors causing school dropout. There was an immense variation in the values, backgrounds and preferences governing their way of thinking and acting when relating to education and work. Hence, the researcher categorized them into four groups: the work oriented, the education oriented, the alternative lifestyle group, and

the bewildered. These different ways of thinking about life did not change much during the follow-up period, indicating that understanding the characteristics of such subcategories and the differences between them may be important when developing school completion programs (Wrede-Jäntti, 2010). Furthermore, stories from the interviews suggest that the individual combination of factors is crucial. For example, while important risk factors like financial strains caused some young people to give up on important life choices like education, others did not experience such problems as crucial to their motivation and engagement in education (Wrede-Jäntti, 2010).

The rich descriptions of dropout processes provided by qualitative studies clearly demonstrate the complex interaction of influences, hence revealing how the introduction of relatively small changes sometimes can tip the scales. These studies demonstrate what Jakobsen (2014) points out as the strength of the qualitative research method when exploring resilience; namely the possibility to include large amounts of information about each participant. The present thesis can be related to this research tradition when focusing on young people`s own experiences of leaving school prematurely.

1.1.3. Summary and implications of prior research on school dropout

When summing up 25 years of research on school dropout, Rumberger and Lim (2008) chose to exclude qualitative studies as these were limited in number. This lack of qualitative data seems to leave us with a gap in our knowledge, because the two fields of research have generated somewhat different answers as to what are the most significant influences in school dropout processes (Audas & Willms, 2001). Although both fields of

research agree that a wide variety of factors can affect the intention to drop out of school, quantitative studies have had a tendency to focus on school achievements in the form of grades, when looking for causes or core factors of dropout (Alexander el al., 2001; Audas & Willms, 2001; de Witte et al., 2013). Qualitative studies, on the other hand, have reported that dropout and at-risk students focus on family problems, teacher-child relationships, difficult peer relationships and mental health problems when explaining their school dropout (Anvik & Gustavsen, 2012; Knesting & Waldron, 2006; Kortering & Braziel, 1999, 2002; Natland & Rasmussen, 2012; Gørlich et al., 2011). This discrepancy may mirror the moderating or mediating model suggested by Janosz and his colleagues (1997), suggesting that present school factors are influenced by prior and present family experiences. Thus, research on achievement and resilience converge to suggest that the quality of parent-child relationships does contribute to the development of competence in important ways (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Sroufe, et al., 2005). For example, the quality of parent-child relationships is found to make important contributions to school engagement, thus affecting the risk of school dropout (Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2014). Children who perceived their parents as providing higher levels of acceptance and supervision and as granting more psychological autonomy (Authoritative parenting) at the age of 14, were more likely to have graduated high school at the age of 22. This association of parent-child relationships with educational status was mediated by school engagement (Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2014).

Accordingly, results from both quantitative and qualitative studies offer legitimate reasons for taking a further look at the influence of parent-child relationships on school dropout. Furthermore, parent-child relationships seem to be a significant factor in the

development of psychopathology (Brumariu & Kerns, 2010; Enns, Cox, & Clara, 2002; Long, Aggen, Gardner, & Kendler, 2015; Otowa, Gardner, Kendler, & Hettema, 2013), and psychopathology is related to school dropout even when controlling for other factors such as performance and family background (Esch et al., 2014; Hjorth et al., 2016; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Consequently, both parent-child relationships and psychopathology seem to be involved in the development of long-term maladaption and thus emerge as interesting factors when trying to understand students who drop out of school and become off track. Moreover, if these young people have been negatively influenced by their parent-child relationships and mental health problems, then future interventions may be organized within existing organizational structures. In Norway there are several social services and health services available that could contribute substantially to the development of positive parent-child relationships and the prevention of mental health problems in children and adolescents. Therefore, we will take a closer look at the role of parent-child relationships and mental health in dropout processes.

1.2. Parent-child relationships and school achievement

Dropout research clearly indicates that various predictors may combine into individual pathways of disengagement. In line with this thinking Lucio, Hunt and Bornovalova (2012) found that the presence of at least two risk factors puts an individual at risk for academic failure. Their results correspond with developmental models focusing on the number of risk factors rather than on the nature of the factors predicting underachievement (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Nevertheless, some children facing various kinds of adversity still manage to bounce back and adapt to school (Masten &

Coatsworth, 1998). Interestingly, the single most robust predictor of resilient adaption

is responsive and supportive parenting (Luthar, Crossman, & Small, 2015). Accordingly,

resilience research concludes that powerful adaptive systems seem to foster and protect

the development of competence, and the quality of parent-child relationships is among

the most prominent of these (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Consequently, the lack of

high-quality relationships might increase the risk of school dropout.

The influence of the parent-child relationship on school achievement and dropout has

been studied from various angles, focusing on parenting practices, parenting styles or

parent-child attachment quality (Spera, 2005). Parenting practices are specific

behaviors used by parents in socializing their children, such as helping with homework

and monitoring school activities. Reviewing the literature, Spera (2005) found a positive

relationship between parenting practices like parental involvement, or parental

monitoring and school-related outcomes, like achievement level, grade point average

and school engagement. Nevertheless, others concluded that, in general, the effects are

weaker and more inconsistent than expected (Fan & Chen, 2001). Although these

parenting practices did occur as themes in the qualitative studies discussed above

(Anvik & Gustavsen, 2012; Gørlich et al., 2011; Natland & Rasmussen, 2012) parenting

styles seemed to have a stronger focus in the interviews. Parenting styles define the

emotional climate in which the child is raised (Spera, 2005). The most researched

parental typology relating to emotional climate seem to be Baumrind`s (1978). First,

there is 'authoritative parenting', defined by high scores on warmth, responsiveness,

maturity demands, and control. Secondly, there is 'authoritarian parenting', defined by

high scores on control and maturity demands but low scores on warmth, responsiveness

and bi-directional communication. Finally, there is 'permissive parenting', defined by

scoring moderately high on responsiveness, maturity demands and control; a style often described as dismissive and unconcerned. When comparing students from families with different parental style, those raised in authoritative families scored higher on a wide variety of measures of school achievement (Adalbjarnardottir & Hafsteinsson, 2001; Baumrind, 1991; Türkel & Tezer, 2008). That said, few studies have focused on the relationship between these broad conceptions of parenting and *school dropout*. The few studies cited by Blondal and Adalbjarnardottir (2014), as well as their own study on the subject, all suggested that students from authoritative families, perceive their parents as providing higher levels of acceptance and supervision and granting them more psychological autonomy. These students were less likely to drop out of school.

The most robust factor in creating long-term resilience, however, is *early* family relationships (Luthar et al., 2015). The dominant approach in understanding such early family relationships is Bowlby`s attachment theory. A key tenet of this theory is the assumption that the child`s early experiences of security constitute a causal mechanism in development (Kim, Boldt, & Kochanska, 2015). To keep safe and to facilitate the acquisition of skills necessary to survive, the child must be able to increase or uphold the proximity to the attachment figure (usually the mother) (Bowlby, 1969/1982). The child is theorized to accomplish this by exercising attachment behaviours. For example, behaviours like smiling and vocalizing work as signals alerting the caregiver to the infant`s interactive efforts. Crying, as another example, is essential for bringing the mother closer to the infant so that unpleasant stimulation can be terminated. Caretakers, of course, may react by permitting, ignoring or rejecting their child`s attachment behaviours. Based on these early and more concurrent interactive experiences, preschool children develop different kinds of trust toward their parents;

they develop different expectations of comfort and support through their experiences

with the availability of the caretaker (Bowlby, 1969/1982). These individual

experiences and expectations of basic security constitute the basis for attachment

quality. Ainsworth and her colleagues explored these individual differences in

attachment quality categorizing them into 'secure', and insecure 'ambivalent/resistant'

or insecure 'avoidant' attachment (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1971; Ainsworth, Blehar,

Waters, & Wall, 1978) (in the research literature the names of the insecure categories

are often shortened to 'ambivalent' and 'avoidant'). These three qualities define

differences in children`s ability and willingness to use the caretaker as a safe haven and

reflect particular strategies for solving adaptational problems. The secure child is

confident that its caretaker will be available, explores the environment freely, seeks the

caregiver when distressed, and is easily soothed. The insecure avoidant child does not

use the caregiver as a safe haven or a base for exploring the environment; this child is

very independent and does not seek to be comforted by the caregiver when distressed.

The insecure ambivalent/resistant child adopts an ambivalent attachment to the

caregiver, clinging to him or her. But when the adult involves in interaction with the

child, the child responds by rejecting the adult, being difficult to soothe and thus failing

to develop feelings of security with the caregiver (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Children

categorized as having secure or insecure attachment quality are perceived as having an

organized strategy for dealing with the stress of separation. However, in some children

this strategy seems to be absent (Ijzendoorn, Schuengel & Bakermans-Kranenburg,

1999). According to Main and Solomon (1990), some children demonstrated an array of

fearful, odd, disorganized or overly conflicted behaviors in the face of separation from

the caregiver, and this behavior was eventually classified as disorganized/disoriented

attachment. This kind of attachment quality was found to be associated with high risk

environments and behavioral problems (Lyons-Ruth, Alpern, & Repacholi, 1993; Lyons-Ruth & Jakobvitz, 2008). The various qualities of attachment have been theorized to constitute a link between early experiences and later outcomes. Smith (2012) argues that in modern attachment theory developed by Bowlby (1969/1982) and Ainsworth (1973), it is a basic assumption that this early security can have long term consequences for intimate relationships, self-perception and potential psychopathology. Moreover, attachment theory suggests a continued importance of attachment figures during adolescence and into young adulthood (Allen, 2008).

Ainsworth and her colleagues (1978) concentrated in particular on how insecure attachment (resistant, avoidant) caused less successful emotion regulation. Ainsworth devised a procedure, much used in research, for measuring the quality of attachment in children between twelve and twenty-four months. This Strange Situation Procedure (SSP) is a play observation situation lasting 20 minutes while a caregiver and a stranger enter and leave the room producing varying degrees of emotional frustration in the child (Ainsworth et al., 1978). These problems with emotion regulation make children invest time and energy in coping with their emotional frustration. Hence, when children focus their attention on emotion regulation activities, the time available for exploring the environment is reduced (Weinfield, Sroufe, Egeland, & Carlson, 2008). Despite Bowlby`s focus on socio-emotional outcomes of variations in attachment quality, it is conceivable that the development of insecure attachment may also involve a potential for disturbing the child`s basic learning processes (Ijzendoorn, Dijkstra, & Bus, 1995). In the long run, such disturbances may negatively influence later academic performance, eventually manifesting themselves in school disengagement processes and dropout.

When we stated above that Bowlby focused on socio-emotional outcomes of attachment, these socio-emotional factors include children`s ability to recognize and understand their own feelings and those of other people, their ability to regulate their own emotions and behaviors in a constructive manner, and their ability to form positive relationships with other people (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004, p. 2). The positive aspects of socio-emotional adjustment are often referred to as social competence, that is, the ability to establish rewarding relationships and function effectively in social contexts (Bohlin & Hagekull, 2009). Bohlin and Hagekull (2009) go on to say that on the negative side, problems in socio-emotional adjustment are often described in terms of the dimensions of 'externalizing' and 'internalizing' behavior. Consequently, parent-child attachment can be perceived as one among several socio-emotional factors in child development.

1.2.1. Parent-child relationships and self-efficacy

One example of a mechanism through which parent-child relationships might affect learning is self-referent thought. The basic phenomenon addressed within this research is people`s sense of efficacy in dealing with their environment (Bandura, 1982). *Self-efficacy* is defined as "people`s beliefs in their capabilities to produce desired effects by their own actions" (Bandura, 1997, p. vii). These beliefs may have a substantial influence on behavior related to school learning and achievement. Students scoring high on such self-efficacy beliefs seem to be easier to engage in school tasks, and thus were found to involve themselves in difficult and challenging tasks more readily than other students (Bandura & Schunk, 1981), and were more motivated to perform motoric and writing-related learning tasks (Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 1997, 1999). Furthermore, self-efficacy was positively related to effort and achievement when working on difficult learning

material, and to persistence in learning (Schunk, 1981; Solomon, 1984). In high school, perceived self-efficacy beliefs and student goals accounted for 30% of the variance in the students` academic course attainment (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992). Looking at self-regulated learning in particular, Zuffianò and his colleagues (2013) found that the beliefs students held about their capacities were the most important predictor of academic performance, second only to prior school achievement. Overall, students scoring high on self-efficacy achieve better because they monitor and self-regulate their impulses, and thus become persistent in the face of difficulties (Komarraju & Nadler, 2013). Interestingly, among students in grades 9-13, those who perceived their social context as supportive, particularly their teachers, had higher self-efficacy (Alvernini & Ludici, 2011), suggesting an association between social relationships and self-referent thought. In a study of self-referent thought, Bandura (1981) ties this concept to children`s development of self-perception and self-knowledge The term negative self-referent thought has been defined as individuals' negative thoughts about their own personal qualities or characteristics (e.g., a thought about dissatisfaction with one's appearance (Borton, Markowitz & Dietrich, 2005). Badura (1981) points to peoples` conception of their own efficacy as one of the most central kinds of self-referent thought.

According to Gecas (1989), self-efficacy beliefs develop through the early interactions between the child and its environment. The most significant aspects of this environment are the family context and the parents. Because parents are key providers of self-efficacy information, it is essential that they provide a stimulating environment with a variety of activities while encouraging the child to explore (Schunk & Pajares, 2002). For such exploration to result in mastery experiences and positive self-efficacy beliefs, parents

must also be *responsive* to the child`s attempts at controlling the world (Maddux, 2009). Accordingly, when parenting is unresponsive or overinvolved, it can generate arousal states that negatively affect the child`s sense of self-efficacy. Arousal states like anxiety, stress or fatigue can undermine children`s self-efficacy if they learn to interpret their physiological arousal as comments on their personal competence (Usher & Pajares, 2008). When children perceive themselves to be effective in controlling such stressors, on the other hand, they are able to regulate anxiety better and can prevent themselves from dwelling on their failures to cope (Bandura, 1993). This description of self-efficacy mechanisms seems to have something in common with the description of the internal working model (IWM) theorized by Bowlby (1969/1982). The IWM is based on the child`s experiences with caretakers and include expectations developed from these interactions of how welcome, valued and competent the child perceives herself/himself to be in the eyes of the caretaker (Smith, 2012). According to attachment theory, these competency perceptions become internalized as part of the child`s own self. It seems likely that such self-referent thoughts form the basis of and influence efficacy beliefs. Nevertheless, as these beliefs are established, they continue to be affected by the family context. Therefore, some researchers have examined the effects of parenting *style* on children's self-referent thought, and the results indicated that an authoritarian parenting style was negatively associated with sense of self-efficacy (Givertz & Segrin, 2014; Whitbeck et al., 1997). Thus, various aspects of parent-child relationships in the form of both attachment processes and parenting styles seem to be related to the development of self-efficacy beliefs.

1.2.1.1. Parent-child relationships, social support, and school achievement

In this section on "Parent-child relationships and school achievement", we have seen how the quality of relationships with parents have been theorized to be essential in the acquisition of important life-skills (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1969/1982). Bowlby (1969/1982) argues that when secure relationships in infancy and childhood become internalized, they form mental structures influencing subsequent life experiences. These IWMs constitute the basis for relating to other people and interpreting them as supportive and available. Such positive expectations formed early in life come to influence children`s general attitudes when later appraising other people`s availability and acceptance. These positive, internalized relationship experiences provide what Sarason, Pierce and Sarason (1990) called a "safety net" for the child. Having such a "safety net" will permit the child to explore a wide range of situations and relationships, enabling the child to develop efficient coping strategies, essential skills, and self-confidence. Accordingly, relationships have many important aspects. One of the most important is the *social support* provided through them (Thompson & Goodvin, 2016).

According to Thompson and Goodvin (2016) the functions of social support in childhood and adulthood are varied. First, they wrote, there is the emotional aspect of social support, often called *emotional support* offering encouragement in the form of affirmation, understanding and empathy, the feeling that others are on your side. As children move into adolescence, their need for intimate self-disclosure and emotional support increase. Second, social support can offer counselling, advice and guidance. Children need to access guidance from adults with more life experiences and more knowledge than themselves. Receiving advice from peers can also provide relevant social understanding, and hence improve the child`s ability to solve social problems.

Third, social support makes information, services, resources and assistance more available. Thompson and Goodvin (2016) commented that this is particularly important while growing up, because children depend on adults both inside and outside the family to provide them with the necessities of life. Such support can come from within the family, the peer group or through formal settings like the school. Finally, children acquire different skills from different people in their support network and learn unique social skills from the context of their peer relationships. Concluding their defining of social support, Thompson and Goodvin (2016) added another essential aspect, namely the function of social monitoring. The child needs access to the kind of protective influence that networks can have in detecting signs of negative development like depressive symptoms or school problems. Preventing harm is essential to promoting well-being.

The support mechanisms described above have been found to be crucial to individuals under stress (Thompson & Goodvin, 2016). First, social support can be stress-preventive by encouraging healthy practices, through the good examples of network members and investing in roles and relationships that promote healthy functioning, or by equipping the child with the necessary coping competencies to overcome ordinary challenges. Second, under stress, support can have a stress-buffering function. According to Thompson and Goodvin (2016), research in health psychology has generated results suggesting that support is associated with a reduction of psychological distress, contributing to quicker recovery, better coping and reducing long-term negative consequences. They argue, however, that it is the *expectation* that social support is available, more than the actual experience of being a recipient of such support that is important to psychological functioning. Thus, *perceived* support seems to be the factor of

importance to psychological well-being. Moreover, for relationships to be *perceived* as supportive and thus contribute to well-being, relationships need to be responsive, warm and accepting, and to provide security (Thompson, 2014). In the school context, many researchers maintain that *different types of social support* are involved in the form of both emotional and academic support (Song, Bong, Lee, & Kim, 2015). Song and colleagues (2015) define perceived *academic support* as something the child may experience when significant others value and encourage learning and academic attainment by modelling, helping and providing guidance and information. This kind of relationship support has been found not only to influence psychological well-being but also to promote adjustment at school. Academic support from teachers, for example, was found to enhance school achievement and school motivation (Ahmed, Minnaert, van der Werf, & Kuyper, 2010; Wentzel, 1998). Although there is a possibility that the two types of support may affect motivational and behavioural responses in separate ways, the evidence is scarce. Thus, it is common practice to measure social support as a single construct. That said, the effect of social support may still have been found to differ depending on *the source* of support.

Social support from parents was found to predict stronger mastery goals and higher academic achievement than social support from peers and teachers (Song et al., 2015). Parental support also predicted college grade point average, while peer and teacher support did not (Cutrona, Cole, Colangelo, Assouline, & Russel, 1994). Nonetheless, social support from parents, teachers and peers on average was positively and modestly related to learning in math and reading (Lee & Smith, 1999), and teacher support positively predicted school presence (Elias & Haynes, 2008). Looking at 99 studies in a meta-analytic approach, Roorda, Koomen, Split and Ort (2011) found that teacher-child

relationships influence both school engagement and school achievement. Furthermore, the importance of relationships in school engagement is also demonstrated in effect studies. A systematic review from the Norwegian Knowledge Centre for Education investigated the effect of various interventions on school dropout (Lillejord et al., 2015). They concluded that although school dropout processes are complex, some interventions more often than others have a documented effect on dropout. Guidance and other interventions aimed at the establishment of caring relationships based on trust and characterized by a balance between demands and support are more successful in reducing school dropout than most other interventions (Lillejord et al., 2015).

Thus, a child`s capacity to develop positive relationships with adults in school is an essential resource when coping with classroom learning. Moreover, there seems to be an increasing interest in how the development of children's sense of self in relationships comes to influence their motivational dynamics. Studies focusing on social cognitive perspectives of motivation (Weiner,1990), internal working models (Bretherton, 1985), classroom climate (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D`Alessandro, 2013), and perceived social support (Wentzel, 1998), all seem to include the core idea that through their long-term interaction with parents, teachers and peers, children develop generalized expectations about the nature of the self in relationships. According to Furrer and Skinner (2003), these expectations are also referred to as a sense of belonging (Goodenow, 1993) or relatedness (Connell, 1990). Relatedness is hypothesized to be one of three basic human needs (the other two being competence and autonomy) in self-determination theory of human motivation, development, and health (Deci & Ryan, 2002). This concept points to the motivational importance of "secure and satisfying connections with others in one`s social milieu" (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991,

p.327; Deci & Ryan, 2008). In their view, *relatedness is the motivational source fostering the internalization of important value*s held by parents, teachers and peers, including values related to school and academic performance. This focus on the importance of relatedness was strongly supported in a series of studies on reasons for a motivational deficit called academic amotivation. Amotivation is characterized by an overall state of alienation, helplessness and passivity (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2002), and social support was found to be negatively related to amotivation in school (Legault, Green-Demers, & Pellier, 2006). The results suggested that many reasons for amotivation stemmed from inadequate social support. The researchers concluded that the intention to drop out was mainly a function of academic amotivation based on negative attitudes towards school. These attitudes had their origin in frustrated relationships with peers, teachers and especially with parents.

The research literature suggests that parent-child relationships and early caregiving constitute important influences on school achievement and dropout (Englund, Egeland, & Collins, 2008; Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000). Early experiences with caregiving relationships seem to place children on probabilistic trajectories of adaption or maladaption by initiating a chain of events (Luthar et al., 2015). However, long-term studies on the link between parent-child attachment and school dropout are scarce. On the other hand, there is substantial research focusing on the association between attachment and academic performance through a variety of potential mediators. Nevertheless, we were unable to find reviews summing up the field and integrating the total knowledge on the *indirect* influence of attachment quality on academic performance and school dropout. Thus, we were left with the challenge of developing an overview of this research ourselves.

1.2.2. Mental health and school dropout

Attachment theory was partly developed to explain the non-linear and complex causal link between attachment and psychopathology (Sroufe, Carlson, Levy, & Egeland, 1999). Therefore, it is interesting that in the qualitative studies discussed above (Anvik & Gustavsen, 2012; Gørlich et al., 2011; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Natland & Rasmussen, 2012), the young people at risk of dropping out of school and employment talked about family relationships *and mental health*. Furthermore, various types of data seem to suggest the relevance of mental health in school disengagement processes. Quantitative research on child and adolescent development suggests that societal changes have introduced new stressors into the lives of young people, stressors like increased worries about the family situation (divorce rates) and about coping with school demands (West & Sweeting, 2003). Several Nordic studies have found an association between experienced stress and mental health problems (Sletten & Bakken, 2016). Girls in particular reported experiencing higher demands on academic achievement and they reported higher levels of subjective health problems. The girls worried about grades, tests, homework and the future, while boys experienced stress related to conflicts with teachers, parents and peers. One central hypothesis is that stress in the form of high expectations on performance, academically or socially, may contribute to mental health problems in adolescence (Sletten & Bakken, 2016). Although the number of studies observing these time trends are limited, two reviews conclude that there has been an increase in internalizing symptoms and psychological distress in young people under the age of 20 during the last three decades (Bor, Dean, Najman, & Hayatbakhsh, 2014; Sletten & Bakken, 2016). Furthermore, several Nordic studies suggest that there is an association between stress *at school* and mental health problems (Sletten & Bakken, 2016). Stress factors like experiencing bullying and problems with academic

performance were the most important risk factors at school related to mental health

problems.

From the studies above, it seems that struggling with increased school demands may

constitute a risk factor related to mental health problems. On the other hand, children

who develop mental health problems due to other circumstances also have to cope with

these increased expectations on academic performance. They may also experience more

school-related stress, and such increased stress may contribute to further mental health

problems and school disengagement processes. In line with these speculations,

researchers on high school dropout in the county of Akershus in Norway found that

20.8% of their 533 students who had dropped out, explained their premature leaving by

mental health problems or psychosocial problems (Markussen & Seland, 2012). The

researchers commented that the substantial amount of dropout explained by mental

health problems in their study is a new and surprising finding in the field of dropout

research. This result is of particular interest since only a few studies have tried to

estimate *the amount of school dropout due to mental disorders*. The results so far place

the estimate somewhere between 10 and 46 percent, leaving us puzzled as to the scope

of the problem (Breslau, Lane, Sampson, & Kessler, 2008; Kessler, Foster, Saunders, &

Stang, 1995; Van der Stoep, Weiss, Kuo, Cheney, & Cohen, 2003).

Nevertheless, reviewing international research concerning health effects on school

dropout, Breslau (2010) concluded that mental disorders were the health factors most

likely to influence school dropout. However, the co-occurrence of disorders constitutes a

challenge. After adjusting for such comorbidity, the association between early onset

mental disorders and school dropout was explained by a few specific externalizing

disorders and ADHD (Breslau, Miller, Chung, & Schweitzser, 2011). Substantial evidence

has supported this link between *externalizing disorders* and educational attainment

(Esch et al., 2014).

When it comes to the influence of *internalizing disorders* in school disengagement

processes, results seem less consistent (Breslau, 2010; Esch, 2014). However, many

studies do find an association between internalizing disorders or symptoms of such

disorders and school dropout (Melkevik, Nielsen, Evensen, Reneflot, & Mykletun,

2016b). Melkevik et al. (2016b) did a review of studies of internalizing problems as a

risk factor in school dropout. They concluded that students with early onset

internalizing disorders seem to be "selected into truncated educational careers"

(Melkevik et al., 2016b, p. 251). Anxiety and depression seem to be risk factors in early

school-leaving, although the causal mechanisms behind the association are not fully

understood. These results are somewhat worrying, because in Norway, depression and

anxiety are the most common problems reported by young people, particularly among

girls (NOVA, 2014). Moreover, in the Young Oslo-study, self-reported depressive

symptoms were found to increase over the last 20 years, and again the increase was

larger among the girls (Sletten & Bakken, 2016). Although most young people in Norway

are satisfied with their mental health, many struggle with mental health problems

(NOVA, 2014).

Summing up, although the results are somewhat ambiguous, Sletten and Bakken (2016)

argue that there has been an increase in the total scope of internalizing problems in

Norway during the last 20 years in people under the age 20. They tie this change to

increases in school-related stress, particularly among girls. Hence, during the last two

decades, an increase in educational expectations and mental health problems seems to be a challenge to the well-being of many young people. However, there are strong indications that students dropping out of school have a higher risk of mental health problems compared to their graduating peers (Breslau, 2010; Hjorth et al., 2016), although the scope of the problem remains unclear.

Many definitions of mental disorders incorporate impairment of *adaptive* functioning as a central characteristic (Masten & Curtis, 2000). Masten & Curtis (2000) maintain that adaptive functioning is defined by how well children are coping with age-relevant developmental tasks within their particular cultural context. In their opinion such adaptive functioning has become a kind of index of how severe a mental illness is. Within this line of thinking, competence refers to adaptational success and one example of such success is high school graduation. Many processes seem to contribute to the development of competence. Likewise, failures in competence may result from various kinds of problems at different levels as the child is interacting with the environment. For example, genetic defects may result in mental retardation and poor parenting may result in maladaptive behavior (Masten & Curtis, 2000). Some children demonstrate positive adaption even in the face of high-risk exposure or serious threats to development, and this particular type of positive adaption is called resilience (Masten & Curtis, 2000). According to White`s (1959, p. 532) theory of competence, the capacity to adapt effectively to the environment originates in a powerful motivational system. This motivational system provides individuals with the potential "to master and derive pleasure from effective interactions with the environment". One of the most important environments to master and derive pleasure from during childhood and adolescence is the school environment. Although children constantly adapt to their environment,

starting school for some may be particularly challenging. At school, children are expected to cope with being away from home, to cope with teachers and classroom demands, and thus to adapt to the many challenges of an unfamiliar context. To successfully adapt to this new type of environment, one kind of competence is of particular importance namely that of regulating one`s emotions (Masten & Curtis, 2000). Being unable to execute such control appropriately in potentially stressful situations constitutes maladaptive self-regulation (McIntyre, Blacher, & Baker, 2006). This kind of dysregulation may result in the development of mental disorders in children (Cole, Michel, & Teti, 1994; Eisenberg, et at., 1996). Moreover, the resulting externalizing and internalizing behaviors are among the most frequently reported maladaptive behaviors in children and adolescents (Lyons, Otis, Huebner, & Hills, 2014). This makes mental health problems a relevant factor when exploring young people`s adaption to school.

Some school adaption processes gradually develop into school dropout processes. In these school-leaving processes where young people are pushed and/or pulled out of school, they make personal decisions affecting their future educational and vocational pathways. These decisions are partly influenced by what students think and feel about their lives and their school trajectories. Consequently, it is essential to know more about the *personal experiences* of those students who drop out during high school, including their experiences of the role of mental health problems in their development of school engagement. However, according to the knowledge base presented in the introduction, it is conceivable that some early school leavers in particular experience the transition from school to employment as challenging, namely those who are not re-enrolled in education or employment 2-5 years after the dropout event. These prior students are the ones struggling the most to get back on track with their lives. They are the ones that

school intervention programs must be able to identify and successfully support while they are in school. There are some indications that these students have higher rates of mental health problems than their peers (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016), but the off-track group has not been the focus of many studies within the field of school dropout research.

1.3. Objectives of the thesis

1. To explore how unemployed youth registered at the NLWA after dropping out of high school would describe and explain critical aspects of their school dropout processes and what these descriptions could tell us about pathways to dropout and unemployment.

2. To critically investigate present knowledge on the role of parent-child attachment in dropout processes by reviewing research on mediators indirectly linking attachment quality to academic performance and school dropout. To focus particularly on research involving the Strange Situation Procedure (SSP) as the most validated measure of early parent-child attachment. To be able to relate such early measures of attachment to school achievement and school dropout, by searching for longitudinal studies investigating potential mediating mechanisms.

3. To study the motivational experiences of unemployed youth who had dropped out of school and were registered at the NLWA, by investigating which factors they think pushed or pulled them out of school, and which factors they think contributed to keeping them in school. To study the role they assign to mental health problems in particular in these motivational processes. Finally, to study

whether their motivational experiences differ from those of students who completed high school and graduated.

2.0. Materials and Methods

This thesis is based on three studies. The first is an interview study with young people who had dropped out of school resulting in the article titled "School dropout and early unemployment". The second is a literature study culminating in a narrative review: "Parent- child attachment, academic performance, and the process of high-school dropout: a narrative review". The third is an interview study including students who had dropped out of school and graduate students, generating the article "Long-term dropout from school and work and mental health in young adults".

2.1. Study samples

In the first study, we interviewed youth who had dropped out of high school and were registered at the local office of the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NLWA). The NLWA recruited a strategic sample of five male and five female participants, aged 18-25, who had dropped out of school and were participating in a national welfare and work-training program named The Qualification Program. Clients registered in this program had no health problems documented by a medical certificate in the NLWA system, and constituted a group of 85 young people with residency in the municipality of Harstad in Northern Norway. The program aimed at activating unemployed youth who had dropped out of school, to get them back on track by motivating them to enrol in further education or helping them adapt to working life. The

strategic sampling focused on young people who were not re-enrolled in school or regular employment 2-5 years after the dropout incident. Although some of these participants were temporarily employed through the NLWA at the time of the interviews, they had not been able to obtain regular stable employment. Recruiting was performed by our contact person at the NLWA, an experienced social worker. She searched through the list of youth registered to this particular program looking for individuals of both sexes who had dropped out of school and were within the age range of 18-25. Within these parameters, the social worker tried to make a purposeful sample based not only on her long-term experience with this group of young people, but also on discussions with and input from the researchers, concerning various life situations and problems descriptions relevant to the sampling process. In line with the confidentiality regulations of the NLWA system, the social worker phoned the potential participants informing them of the study and asking them if they wanted to participate. The researchers had supplied the social worker with a written information sheet describing the study to use when recruiting participants. This sheet included information on confidentiality, the right to withdraw from the study, and objectives of the study. Subsequently, the participants were asked by the social worker if they agreed to participate. If they gave their consent on the phone, they were asked their permission for researchers to be given their telephone number so the researchers could contact them by text message or phone to make an appointment. Only one of eleven clients contacted by the NLWA declined to participate. Those who gave their consent received a phone call to make a first appointment. When appointments needed to be changed, this was done by text message.

In this sample of ten youths who had dropped out of high school only two participants had originally enrolled in general studies, the others in vocational tracks. Some had stayed only a few weeks before dropping out, but most of them had completed the first year and dropped out during the second year. During school and in the aftermath of dropout, these participants had rarely held a job for more than a few months at a time. For several of them, periods between jobs had been longer than periods in employment. With one exception most of their employment had been administered through school or the NLWA. Sometimes they had also got odd jobs through family contacts. They had had short-term engagements in kindergartens, nursing homes, telemarketing, youth clubs, service stations, various shops and fishing boats. Although their job situation had been difficult, all except one participant had managed to move out of the parental home. Some female participants had children, but none of the men. Most of the women had either recently lived with or did live with a boyfriend at the time of the interview, but only one of the men lived with a girlfriend.

Recruiting young people who were off-track after dropping out of school was a laborious process. Not all potential participants on the social worker`s list answered their phone, some had moved out of the county and others had changed their number or were unavailable for other reasons. Although all but one of those we reached readily agreed to participate, some found it difficult to find a suitable time for an interview. Often we needed to make several appointments before we were able to meet for an interview.

In the third study, the same contact person at the NLWA made a list of clients between 18-25 years of age who had dropped out of high school and had no health problems documented by a medical certificate in the NLWA system. They were all struggling to get

back on track 2- 5 years after school dropout. These young men and women received different kinds of support to help them adapt to working life or to motivate them for re-enrolment in high school, or to seek out other educational alternatives. The sampling procedure resembled the one in study 1. However, this time the researchers sent the participants written information material due to the fact that we were going to ask questions about mental health and do clinical interviews. A request to participate and a form of consent were also included in the letter. After minimum two weeks, the researchers contacted those who had not answered our request, by texting them to ask if they wanted to participate. Two potential participants declined and four male and three female participants gave their consent. All participants were contacted by text message to make an appointment for the interview. These seven young people who had dropped out of school and employment constituted our sample. All but one had moved out of their parental home, living with a girlfriend, on their own or with friends. None of them had children. All but one had dropped out from vocational studies, and two had tried and dropped out at least twice from different vocational tracks. Furthermore, seven high school graduates, aged 18-25, at the time fresh students unknown to the researcher at the social education program at Harstad College, (now UIT campus Harstad) were recruited through information given by the researcher in class. These students started and completed their bachelor studies while the researcher was employed as a scholar at the same local university college and had taken leave of absence from her regular job as assistant professor. Thus, the researcher had not been in contact with these students in her capacity of lecturer before recruiting them nor during their bachelor studies. During the presentation in class, the researcher informed the students that she wanted to recruit college students who had graduated from high school, including those that had struggled to complete school but still had managed to

graduate. The students were encouraged to contact the researchers by e-mail or text message to make an appointment if they wanted to participate. Written information about the study was left in the classroom for those interested to take home. Afterwards, four female and three male students contacted the researcher by e-mail to make appointments for an interview. The first seven students to contact us were included in the sample. Five of the college students had graduated from vocational tracks, and two from general studies. All of them had moved out of their parental homes. Three lived with a boyfriend or girlfriend. No one in the sample had children. Most of them had spent at least one year improving their grades and taking odd jobs before enrolling in a bachelor education.

2.2. The qualitative interviews

These studies focused long-term school dropout and unemployment. The investigation of such personal experiences might very likely activate unpleasant emotions. Consequently, conducting personal interviews might allow deeper exploration of these sensitive topics (Kisely & Kendall, 2011).

In the first study, two experienced interviewers conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews at the local college. Gro Ramsdal conducted seven of ten interviews, and one of the two co-authors of this article Rikke G. Gjærum conducted the remaining three. The participants were all interviewed in rooms at Harstad College (now UIT Harstad Campus). Immediately before the interview, they were again informed about their rights to withdraw at any time, of the objective of the study, and that the data would be anonymized to protect them from being recognized. The participants gave their written consent in connection with the interviews. The interviews lasted from one and a half to

two hours, and were audio-recorded. An interview guide had been prepared, including a list of themes like "Everyday Life", "Identity", "Work and Education", "Experiences with the NLWA", "Subjective Explanations of Dropout", and "Present Day Quality of Life" (appendix 1). As this was our first interviews with young people who had dropped out of high school and were unemployed, we aimed to have a broad line of questioning, and to be sensitive to whatever themes the participants themselves might introduce as important experiences in their dropout and unemployment processes. Using this form of inductive research is considered particularly appropriate when studying complex realities and groups that are underresearched (Whitley & Crawford, 2005), like young people who have dropped out of school and are struggling to get back on track. This open approach proved particularly useful as the participants kept coming back to a few particular themes for most of the questions or topics we introduced to them. Moreover, the participants turned out to be surprisingly open and willing to talk about their unpleasant experiences with school and their difficult transitions into adult life. Some of them even expressed an experience of new insight while contemplating their dropout processes from school and employment, and commented that they had not talked much about their experiences with school before.

In the third study, we wanted to know more about what characterized the experiences of young people who had dropped out of school and were off-track 2-5 years later in comparison with graduates, particularly related to potential differences in motivational factors. As we aspired to conduct a more focused exploration into what they personally experienced as motivating and demotivating factors, two main themes emerged as a focus for the interview guide (appendix 2). First, there was their experiences with mental health. We wanted to investigate whether mental health problems

spontaneously came up in the interviews, and to explore the relevance given to mental health when participants talked in general about factors motivating and demotivating them to complete school and stay employed. Thus, we waited until the end of the interview before asking them explicitly about any mental health issues. To supplement the descriptions given in the qualitative interviews participants were also asked to complete the clinical interview (i.e. the M.I.N.I), in order to diagnose present mental disorders covered by this instrument. Secondly, we were particularly interested in what motivational factors the participants themselves experienced as essential in their dropout processes. Furthermore, to be able to differentiate characteristics of the off-track dropout processes, we included a group of same-aged high school graduates in their last year of college into the study.

Thus, the researcher qualitatively interviewed seven young people who had dropped out of school and seven graduates, all aged 18-25. The participants in the third study were interviewed in the same rooms at Harstad College as those in study 1. All participants gave their written consent. Before being interviewed, they received an oral summary of the written information they had previously received in the e-mail explaining the study, and were again reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

The college students were more easily recruited, hence these interviews were conducted first and constituted a background for analyzing the interviews of those who had dropped out. The semi-structured topic guide in study 3 introduced a more narrow line of questioning, and focused mainly on their experiences of motivational factors like: 1.What kept them on track for school completion and stable employment?, and 2. What

pulled or pushed them off track for school completion and stable employment? In study 3, we were particularly interested in the participants` experiences with mental health as a potential influence in school dropout or completion processes. Study 1 focused more openly on how young people who had dropped out of school and were not enrolled in education or stable employment 2-5 years after the dropout event, understood what had happened to them in general and how they thought school dropout had influenced their present lives. Study 3 on the other hand, focused specifically on mental health and their experiences of other negative or positive influences on school engagement and on their intentions to drop out or stay in school. We were also curious about their experiences of the role that mental health problems played in these processes. In case such experiences should not be spontaneously shared during the interview, we had included some direct questions about their experiences with mental health problems at the end. However, most participants spontaneously introduced the topic, talking about the emotional strain brought on by family problems and social and academic problems. The participants spoke openly and with involvement about their mental health issues. Even after we had introduced other topics, the participants kept exploring mental health issues by reintroducing them and linking them to new themes.

The ten interviews from study 1 were transcribed by two research assistants and the fourteen interviews in study 3 were all were fully transcribed by Gro H. Ramsdal. Data from both studies 1 and 3 were analyzed using a qualitative methodology drawing on concepts from Grounded Theory (GT) (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1992, 2001). Both samples, one consisting of ten participants and the other of seven students who had dropped out and seven college students, are at the lower end of the spectrum concerning sample size, although it did allow us to immerse ourselves in the interviews

and observe interactions of factors in each individual process, making detailed comparisons between individuals possible.

The analysis of the data in study 1 started with a meticulous reading and rereading of the first transcript – to give room for open coding and analysis before the next interview was performed. Subsequently, data were analyzed one transcript at a time. Glaser and Strauss (1967) defined open coding as staying close to the transcribed wording while describing 'what is going on in the data'. The next step of the analysis involved the examination of similarities and dissimilarities in the content of open codes to generate higher level concepts related to dropping out of school and work. For example, we found that the similarities connecting open codes like "parents` divorce", "moving between foster homes", "moving between parental homes", "father moving away" and "feeling lonely" were higher level concepts like "emotional loss" and "disturbed attachment process". By color-coding text samples representing various concepts in each transcript, we were able to do a constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of related text samples within and between transcripts. It was through this constant comparison of text samples where concepts gradually formed clusters that themes started to emerge (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For instance, clusters like "emotional loss" and "disturbed attachment process" gradually elicited the discovery of the "Abandonment" theme, and clusters like "low academic self-efficacy", "absenteeism" and "lack of meaning" elicited the "Amotivation" theme. Through the progressing process of analysis, memos were written to record the researcher`s thinking over time as I collected and coded data by constant comparison. According to Glaser (2013), it is in the memos that concepts and theoretical ideas emerge and are stored when doing GT analysis. Thus, memoing was essential to the process of relating concepts to more inclusive concepts and finally

generating the six themes presented in the article, and to explore the relationship between them.

Word by word transcripts from study 3 were also read and reread – one at a time - to give room for open coding and exploring 'what went on' in the data before the next interview was performed. The students were interviewed first. As they were recruited more quickly, the open coding of their transcripts formed a basis for the analysis of the subsequent dropout interviews. By color-coding we examined the open codes for common features and differences in content, allowing for the data to be grouped. Through such constant comparison and memo-writing (Wynn et al., 2009), we searched for more inclusive concepts describing motivational contributions, positive and negative, relating to participants` struggle to stay in school. First, the open coding process generated a very large number of concepts describing negative contributions to their school engagement processes, such as: "depressive mood", "sleeping problems", "being bullied", "social withdrawal", "low self-efficacy", "low self-esteem", "loneliness", "eating problems", "motivational problems", "attention problems", "learning difficulties", and "feelings of helplessness". By constant comparison, we elicited higher order concepts like "disturbed self-regulation", "negative self-views" and "relationship problems" that eventually converged into a theme of mental health issues here called "Mental disorders". Second, the open codings describing the positive contributions to school engagement were fewer, and involved concepts like "parental expectations", "parental school involvement"," school motivated friends", "positive teachers-child relationships", and "extended family engagement". These concepts converged into a theme named "Access to social support and resources". Through the analysing process

of memos and constant comparison, we explored the concepts and themes and the relationships between them.

2.3. The clinical interviews

Finally, all 14 participants in study 3 completed a clinical interview called the Mini-International Neuropsychiatric Interview version 5.0.0 (M.I.N.I) (Sheehan et al., 2006). This is a short structured interview including 120 items screening for the most common Axis I mental disorders in the ICD-10 and DSM-IV diagnostic manuals, including affective disorders (major depressive disorder, dysthymia, bipolar disorder), anxiety disorders (agoraphobia, panic disorder, social phobia, generalized anxiety disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder), obsessive-compulsive disorder, alcohol and substance-related disorders, psychotic disorders, and eating disorders (anorexia, bulimia). The Axis-II disorder called antisocial personality disorder is also briefly covered (Sheehan, Lecrubier, & Sheehan, 1988). The interview was designed in clinician and patient-rated formats. Only the former was used here. The M.I.N.I was developed to replace the Structural Clinical Interview for DSM-III-R Patients (SCID-P) and the Composite International Diagnostic Interview (CIDI) in clinical trials by meeting the needs of a brief, reliable and valid structured diagnostic interview. Looking at the concordance of the M.I.N.I with the SCID-P, Sheehan and colleagues (1988) found that overall the M.I.N.I diagnoses had good or very good kappa values with only one single value below .50, namely the one for current drug dependence. Sensitivity was over 0.70 for all diagnoses except dysthymia, obsessive compulsive disorder and current drug abuse. Negative predictive values and efficiency scores were 0.85 or higher across all of the diagnoses. Positive predictive values were more variable. Interrater reliability tests showed all

kappa values to be over 0.75 and the majority to be over 0.90. Test-retest reliability was somewhat lower, showing fourteen out of 23 values above 0.75 and only one value (current mania) under 0.40. Investigating the concordance with CIDI, Lecrubier and colleagues (1997) also found kappa coefficient, sensitivity and specificity to be good or very good for all diagnoses except for generalized anxiety (GAD) (kappa= 0.36), agoraphobia (sensitivity= 0.59) and bulimia (kappa= 0.53), While interrater and test-retest reliabilities were good. The formulations for GAD and agoraphobia were changed for the current version of the M.I.N.I. When used among patients admitted to a Norwegian acute psychiatric ward, the M.I.N.I was found to have moderately good test-retest reliability (Mordal, Gundersen, & Bramness, 2010).

The clinical interviews were included to ensure data collection on mental health by the use of various methods. In addition to the participants` spontaneous descriptions of prior and present mental health problems in the qualitative interviews, data from clinical interviews made us able to diagnose the participants` present mental disorders. Using different methods (triangulation) within the same project, thus making comparison of results possible, is considered a desirable credibility check within qualitative research (Kisely & Kendall, 2011; Whitley & Crawford, 2005). Thus, by including the clinical interviews, we hopefully added to the credibility by triangulation (Creswell, 2013; Shenton, 2004).

The clinical interviews were conducted immediately after the qualitative interviews. The participants themselves decided whether to have a break or not between the two interviews. The person performing the clinical interviews also performed the qualitative interviews. I am an experienced psychologist specialized in psychotherapy. Two

participants had confirmed during the interviews that they wanted to be informed about the results. After I had scored the interviews I phoned (their choice) these participants and informed them of the results.

2.4. The review

The second study was a narrative review. A narrative review involves synthesising the literature on the area of interest (Bystad, Bystad & Wynn, 2015; Wynn, Høiseth, & Pettersen, 2012). According to Green, Johnson and Adams (2006) there are three types of narrative reviews namely; editorials, commentaries and finally the type that we performed called narrative overviews, also called unsystematic narrative reviews. The purpose of the narrative overview, is to make sense of the existing literature within a certain field of knowledge by interpreting previous findings in a narrative fashion, explaining new developments and framing currents issues (Rumrill & Fitzgerald, 2001). These full length articles provide a more comprehensive summary of published literature that those given in introductions or discussions in other research articles (Green et al., 2006). The goal of a literature review can be theory development, theory evaluation, problem identification or the pulling together of what is known about a particular phenomenon (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). Baumeister and Leary (1997) argue that a narrative literature review is particularly valuable when trying to link together a large number of studies on different topics for reinterpretation or interconnection. When having a more narrow focus, researchers may prefer to perform a systematic review and/or a meta-analysis (Collins & Fauser, 2005). The systematic reviews attempt to reduce the reviewer bias by critically evaluating every study included in the review and if possible statistically combining the results (2005; Green et al., 2006). Collins and Fauser (2005, p.103) argue that the primary problem of this

narrow focus and rigorous method is that it does not "allow for comprehensive

coverage". Our goal was to interconnect several fields of study to make an overview of

research linking parent-child attachment, academic performance and school dropout

processes through four mediating mechanisms. This goal made a comprehensive

coverage necessary. We searched the databases of Google Scholar, Psych Info and

Academic Search Premier for relevant literature, as we experienced these to deliver the

most relevant answers to our search terms: "parental attachment", "parent-child

attachment", "school achievement", "school dropout", and "school completion",

respectively. We explored various combinations of these search terms looking for

studies of relevance meeting our criteria.

Initially these searches resulted in a very high number of studies making it essential to

perform a structured and justified selection. Accordingly, we restricted our search to

studies measuring the attachment aspects of the parent-child relationship, including

only dropout studies measuring attachment as this concept is narrowly defined within

attachment theory (Solomon & George, 2008). Consequently, we focused primarily on

relevant longitudinal studies using the Strange Situation Procedure (SSP) developed by

Ainsworth and colleagues (1978) to measure parent-child attachment. This kind of

attachment classification performed by highly trained judges has been found to capture

essential qualities of the infant-mother relationship. According to Solomon and George

(2008), the reliability, stability and predictive validity of the SSP are well established in

studies made in the US and Western Europe. The SSP is a laboratory procedure

"designed to capture the balance of attachment and exploratory behaviour under

conditions of increasing though moderate stress" (Solomon & George, 2008, p. 386).

This laboratory procedure is a play observation situation used for the classification of

behavior in young toddlers from 12 to 20 months of age (Ainsworth et al., 1978). The

situation lasts 20 minutes while a caregiver and a stranger enter and leave the room

producing varying degrees of emotional frustration. These problems with emotion

regulation make children invest time and energy in coping with their emotional

frustration. The system provides instructions for how to classify these reaction patterns

into one secure group (B) and two insecure groups, avoidant (A) and resistant or

ambivalent (C). These classifications are based on how the child behaves with the

caretaker during the two reunion episodes while taking into consideration the child`s

behavior during the rest of the procedure in response to the caregiver`s current

behavior (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

We did, however, also include some studies incorporating measurements less validated

than the SSP. It is important to bear in mind that the SSP is used mainly to evaluate

attachment in toddlers, and that attachment quality may vary across developmental

periods (Allen, 2008). Thus, long-term studies sometimes included less validated

measurements of children`s attachment to caregiver during middle school and

adolescence. Because children's` contexts change and life events may influence the

caregiver-child attachment over time it is important to also provide measures of

attachment quality at a later age. Measuring attachment and school achievement at the

same point in time and measuring attachment at the time of school dropout may be

important. Only such concurrent measures may clarify potential differences in

influences between early quality of attachment compared to stable quality of

attachment. Meta-studies and systematic reviews also included these kinds of

attachment measures. Therefore, we found it necessary to include some longitudinal

studies and meta-studies which did not exclusively adhere to the primary criterion of

including SSP studies only. In addition to studies including samples from different age groups, we included studies aimed at high-risk and low-risk populations. Sample size was another criterion, as we only included studies with more than 30 participants in our review. Although a large number of studies with more than 30 participants surfaced in data searches on "school dropout", these studies seldom included measures on parent-child attachment. Dropout studies used measures like parental support, family background, family socialization, parental involvement or parenting style when assessing the parent-child relationship (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2009; Rumberger, 1995). By widening the search and including the results from the "school achievement" searches, we were able to locate more studies correlating *attachment* and *risk* of school dropout. Data searches on "parent-child attachment" also came up with far more studies relating attachment to school achievement than those relating attachment to school dropout. Furthermore, we hand-searched bibliographies in relevant articles and book chapters to look for studies adhering to our criteria. Thus, we ended up including a total of 158 scientific articles and book chapters in our review. These 158 studies were all related to one or more of the four mediating hypotheses proposed by Ijzendoorn and his colleagues, (1995): the attachment-exploration (self-regulation) hypothesis, the social network hypothesis, the attachment-teaching hypothesis, and the attachment-cooperation hypothesis. Studies investigating the first two mediating mechanisms, self-regulation and the social network, were far more numerous than studies related to the last two hypotheses. Thus, all studies found in our data search that investigated these last two hypotheses while also meeting the other search criteria were included in the review. Concerning the first two hypotheses, we included studies meeting our criteria and in which the main objective of the study was linked to at least one of these hypotheses.

2.5. Ethics

The Norwegian Social Science Data Service (NSD) granted permission to perform the first study in 2008, and all participants gave written informed consent. In this project, we asked the participants open questions about their thoughts on dropping out of school without including any questions about health issues. The second study was a review, and thus did not need any approval. The Regional Committee for Medical and Health Research Ethics (2013 /101 REK Nord) approved the third study, where we included questions on mental health problems and clinical interviews. Participation was voluntary and all participants gave written informed consent. The participants were informed both in the introduction letter and before we started the interview that they could withdraw their consent and exclude themselves from the study at any time. Furthermore, we did give advice about how to connect with free health care services and offered to contact these services for them if the results of the interviews should make such contact desirable. Two participants had confirmed during the interviews that they wanted to be informed about the results of the M.I.N.I. After I (GHR) had scored the interviews I phoned (their choice) these participants and informed them of the results. The tapes were kept in a locked cabinet in my office. Both the tapes and the list of participants were deleted after all interviews had been transcribed. The transcriptions did not include any identifying information. When writing the articles, we removed all information that indirectly could identify individual participants.

3.0. Results

3.1. Results study 1

Young people dropping out of high school and struggling to get back on track described how a large number of risk factors combined into their individual pathways leading to school dropout and unemployment. Although these pathways were individual, the participants` descriptions spontaneously focused on various experiences of "Abandonment." This key topic kept reappearing through the interviews in stories of adoption, foster homes, family problems, mental health problems, or one parent moving away, and thus becoming less available to the participant. The various forms of abandonment often left these children and adolescents to cope on their own with the other problems they described, like academic "Amotivation", "Social awkwardness", and "Social exclusion and loneliness", all resulting in achievement problems. The participants described how an accumulation of risk factors had come to challenge their resilience over many years, eventually resulting in school dropout and unemployment. Three participants described problems with reading and writing, one participant reported struggling with academic performance due to attention problems. Half of the sample had experienced a lack of school engagement due to achievement problems and lack of effective academic support at school. More than half of them had been bullied, and some described having trouble making friends or getting along with teachers, peers, and colleagues and bosses at work. A few described how they defended themselves against bullying, teasing and other kinds of peer rejection by aggressively dismissing their peers, getting into fights during recess, or making friends with other demotivated students. Two participants were coping with strong emotional reactions to foster home placements and adoption processes. These emotional challenges gradually came to

interfere with their learning processes, and grades suffered massively in spite of their good cognitive capacities. A few participants had problems with overweight, causing them to be bullied and making their social life in middle school and high school particularly challenging. Whether reacting with withdrawal or aggression, they described how being at school was stressful and how this stress gradually influenced their school engagement and their grades negatively. Consequently, both experiences of social and academic failure were reported to result in the demotivation and absenteeism that had always preceded dropout in this sample.

When discussing the possibility of re-enrolling in school, a state of extreme demotivation was described by some participants. They said that going back to school was impossible for them. It was too late for that, and nothing could be done about their problems with school, whether these were social or academic or both. It was their descriptions of these feelings of hopelessness that became categorized as "Amotivation". They expressed the belief that nothing they could do had the potential to turn their experiences of school failure into coping. Nevertheless, leaving the social and academic problems of school behind was not spontaneously described as a relief, and was often associated with a period of social isolation, indicating that several had little access to alternative social networks outside school. After the dropout event, many of the boys described long periods of withdrawal into their homes where they stayed awake at night to play video games and chat on line, and then slept through most of the day. Several described how the programs at the NLWA had helped them regain a normal daily rhythm, although video games still took up a lot of time for some when they got home in the afternoon. Two of the participants had become pregnant, and described how the lack of support at home and at school had been the main contributing factors in their

dropping out processes. After the drop out event, one mother reported that she had spent most of her time at home with the children feeling lonely and isolated, while the other dreamed of re-enrolling in school while she juggled complicated logistics to combine work with taking care of her child.

All participants had had some kind of odd jobs, but these had often been organized by school before dropping out, or by the NLWA after dropping out. Mostly, these jobs were short-term engagements, and they seldom lasted more than three months. However, even when jobs were available for longer periods of time, the participants reported quitting after a few months. In the aftermath of school dropout, all the participants had become economically dependent on the NLWA. In spite of this, only two expressed experiences of dependency or worries about their financial situation. They did, however, feel personal responsibility for their school dropout. When asked explicitly about their own explanations, they talked about lack of willpower or lack of ability to learn what they called "theory", describing how these problems lead to absenteeism and finally academic "Amotivation". Nevertheless, while reporting on these demotivating processes, they kept describing being abandoned physically or psychologically by important care givers, thus making support less available when facing problems at school. They never described the development of supportive teacher-child relationships, and often experienced peer rejection and loneliness. Some of these participants described how dropping out in itself had caused them to slump into passivity, living their lives inside their homes and on the Internet, making finding employment increasingly difficult.

3.2. Results study 2

The review focused on four hypotheses pointed out by Ijzendoorn and colleagues (1995) as likely mechanisms for explaining the association between socio-emotional and cognitive development. They investigated this association by focusing on parent-child attachment. Although their meta-analysis did demonstrate an association between insecure attachment and lower levels of cognitive functioning and language competence, they called for more research on "the process through which the quality of attachment affects cognitive and language development" to explain this association (Ijzendoorn et al., 1995, p. 126). Thus we set out to investigate if subsequent research had confirmed the potential mediation mechanisms suggested by Ijzendoorn and colleagues (1995). First we wanted to investigate if research had linked parent-child attachment to the suggested mediating factors of maternal instruction, self-regulation, social competence and test anxiety. Secondly we wanted to investigate if these four factors were found to be associated with school achievement and school dropout. These two types of association are the prerequisite for mediation. Accordingly, we also searched for studies statistically analyzing data to look for statistical mediation effects of parent-child attachment on school achievement and school dropout through these four potential mediating mechanisms. These three types of studies could help to suggest the factors through which the quality of parent-child attachment might cascade into other functional domains particularly that of academic performance. The review process made us realize that the research literature investigating potential mediators of parent-child attachment on school achievement was confusing. For example, the mediating effects of teacher-child relationships, peer relationships and behaviour problems were reviewed separately, making it difficult to develop an overall picture of existing support for various mediators. Consequently, bringing these results together and getting an

overview of this literature was important in itself. Making such an overview made us realize two things. First, we realized that there was a substantial amount of research supporting a potential mediation of attachment on academic performance through two of the four mediating mechanisms suggested by Ijzendoorn and his colleagues (1995), namely: the attachment-exploration (self-regulation) hypothesis, and the social network hypothesis, and more scarce support for the attachment-teaching hypothesis the attachment-cooperation (test behavior) hypothesis.

In line with the first hypothesis, research did suggest that variations in attachment quality were associated with variations in the development of exploration patterns and problem-solving skills. Securely attached children were found to solicit more appropriate assistance in problem-solving situations than insecurely attached children (Coleman & Thompson, 2002), and they developed help-seeking strategies that made them better able to self-regulate emotion (Calkins, 2004). Studies showed that the dyadic interaction in secure relationships elicited more internal state language (Lemche, Kreppner, Joraschky, & Klann-Delius, 2007) and a clearer understanding of emotions in general (De Rosney & Harris, 2002). 'Internal state language' is a concept related to research on theory of mind, often called mind 'reading capacity' (Lemche et al., 2007). Children`s ability to understand other peoples mental states include their ability to reflect on other peoples` states of mind through the use of language. This phenomenon is called internal state language. Furthermore, there was a growing support for linking children`s emotionality and regulatory capabilities with cognition and learning, indicating that optimal arousal is essential for learning to take place (Blair & Dennis, 2010). Consequently, the development of appropriate strategies for regulating emotional arousal becomes a prerequisite for learning. Children may, however, develop

self-regulation strategies that are more or less maladaptive, and such strategies may constitute a risk for psychopathology (Dale & Baumeister, 1999; Eisenberg, Spinrad & Eggum, 2010). A considerable amount of research did find an association between insecure or disorganized attachment and externalizing and internalizing behavior, although the associations with internalization were much weaker than for externalization (Groh, Roisman, Ijzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Fearon, 2012).

The second hypothesis predicts that early attachment experiences affect the child`s ability to develop positive relationships with people in general, and that the quality of new relationships may affect the child`s access to cognitive stimulation and thus influence skill acquisition (Ijzendoorn et al., 1995). Thus, securely attached children become better at exploring and capitalizing on the opportunities for learning provided by their peer groups (Sroufe et al., 2005). In line with this hypothesis, two meta-analyses found a reflection of early attachment in the quality of peer relationships across the life span (Pallini, Baiocco, Schneider, Madigan, & Atkinson, 2014; Schneider, Atkinson, & Tardif, 2001). However, the effect sizes were small, and the results caused some debate. Nevertheless, Pallini and his colleagues (2014) argue that the recurrent pattern of small effects has established a link between attachment security and competence with peers. Furthermore, competence with peers was related to several markers of school engagement. Children with little competence with peers have been found to risk rejection, maladjustment, truancy, suspension and school dropout, while peer acceptance, on the other hand, has been found to have a positive influence on children`s academic progress (Buhs & Ladd, 2001; Gorrese & Ruggieri, 2012; Kingery, Erdley, & Marshall, 2011; Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1997; Woodward & Fergusson, 2000; Zettergren, 2003).

In addition to peer relationships, another kind of relationship becomes essential as more time is spent at school, namely the teacher-child relationship. The teachers have been hypothesized to develop a potential for becoming secondary attachment figures as they spend an increasing amount of time with the child (Ainsworth, 1991). Again, research literature suggested that prior relationships influenced the present ones, and that teacher-child relationships were moderately associated with early attachment quality (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). These new relationships in children's lives seemed to have a particular relevance for children at risk. For at-risk children, teacher-child relationships took on a role as potential buffers in their ongoing trajectories. Harmonious relationships with teachers influenced the development of children at risk behaviourally and demographically by improving their sosio-emotional functioning and their academic performance (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Generally, research strongly suggested that teacher-child relationships influence children`s school adaption, including their academic performance (Baker, 2006; Baker, Grant, & Morlock, 2008; Berry & O`Connor, 2012; Gregory & Weinstein, 2004, Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Split, Hughes, Wu, & Kwok, 2012).

The third hypothesis, the attachment-teaching hypothesis, tries to explain how various kinds of attachment quality influence the child`s ability to uphold a goal-corrected partnership with the caregiver (Ijzendoorn et al., 1995). This is a partnership where the child and the parent have developed an ability to share goals and plans, and this sharing is, according to attachment theory (Bowlby 1969/1982) a prerequisite for further learning. However, for the child to benefit from a goal-corrected partnership, the caregiver must be able to assist the child`s metacognitive development. Vygotsky (1978)

theorized that the partnership between mother and child is most effective when mothers pitch their instructions in a way that reduces task complexity. When mothers provide this kind of instruction, the child can focus on what is within its capability. Gradually, by observing the mother, the child will also develop new capabilities. It was, however, Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) that named the mechanism for this kind of adult-led instructions. They called it 'scaffolding', indicating that the caregiver provides a social 'scaffold' to help the child acquire skills related to joint attention and joint action (Bruner, 1978). Unfortunately, the research on the relationship between attachment quality and the quality of `scaffolding' provided by the caregiver is scarce. Nevertheless, some studies have found mothers of secure children to provide high quality-tutoring, show better attunement, give more task relevant instructions, and to be more encouraging in developing academic skills than mothers of insecurely attached children (Isabella & Belsky, 1991; Meins, 1997; Ijzendoorn et al., 1995). A limited number of studies also showed that high-quality maternal scaffolding was positively related to children`s acquisition of cognitive skills (Hartmann, Eri, & Skinstad, 1989; Saltaris et al., 2004).

Finally, the fourth hypothesis claims that securely attached children are more likely to behave cooperatively when tested in a set of standardized tasks, and to treat the test more like a game (Ijzendoorn et al., 1995). Hence, cooperative behaviour in test situations seems to be based on the development of basic trust in self and others. Due to sensitive care resulting in positive working models of the self, secure children are hypothesized to become less anxious and cope better when away from their parents (Ijzendoorn et al., 1995). Supporting this way of thinking, a meta-analysis concluded that insecure attachment was associated with anxiety (Colonnesi, Draijer, Stams, van der

Bruggen, & Bögels, 2011), but few studies were found on other specific types of test behavior. Nonetheless, in test situations, behavior like communication with adults and sustained attention are critical to cope with this type of problem-solving situations, and both these behaviours were associated with attachment quality (Belsky & Fearon, 2002; Clark, Ungerer, Chahoud, Johnson, & Stiefel, 2002; Gersten, Coster, Schneider-Rosen, Carlson, & Cicchetti, 1986; Goldberg, 1997; Moss, Cyr, & Dubois-Comtois, 2004). Thus, the fact that the number of studies is limited, makes any conclusions about this hypothesis somewhat premature. There is, however, more support for the association between test anxiety and school underachievement (McDonald, 2001; Seipp, 1991).

While becoming absorbed in the comprehensive literature investigating a potential mediation of attachment on academic performance through the four mediating mechanisms suggested by Ijzendoorn and his colleagues (1995), we made another important discovery. What most of these studies actually did was to establish the *preconditions* of mediation. Studies either suggested an association between parent-child attachment and one mediator, *or* suggested an association between this mediator and school achievement or school dropout. However, only very few studies actually *tested mediation effects statistically*. Nevertheless, the longitudinal studies of West, Mathews, & Kerns, (2013) and O`Connor and McCartney (2007) demonstrated statistically significant mediation effects. They found that all four mediation mechanisms suggested by Ijzendoorn and colleagues (1995) significantly mediated effects of attachment on school achievement.

3.3. Results study 3

Six out of seven young people that had dropped out of school 2-5 years ago and were off-track, spontaneously described mental health problems like eating disorders, social phobia and depression when encouraged to talk about what brought them off track during their school years. Four of them reported how these problems accumulated over the years at school causing increasing absenteeism, and that they were eventually diagnosed by their GP or Child Mental Health Services. Two of them described how symptoms of mental health problems appeared immediately before the dropout event, but mainly manifested themselves in the aftermath of school dropout, making stable employment difficult. The seven college students who were interviewed for comparison also spontaneously talked about mental health issues. However, they described more short-term problems starting at the end of middle school influencing their grades negatively and resulting in periods of increased absenteeism. Accordingly, one of the two main themes in these interviews was named "Mental disorders"

Nevertheless, the college students were able to access resources and social support. When asked about motivational factors, they described a network of supporting people, adults and peers. Compared to those who had dropped out, they described less serious symptoms of mental health problems, but these problems triggered a wide variety of support. The college students reported how various teachers had been essential in their coping with school before and during problem development. They had also reached out to the school nurse and the student counsellor. Some had been referred to therapists or been backed up by their athletic coaches. Several had been helped by a resourceful parental network where they were able to find tutors or important information, for example about summer school. Finally, the college students` own networks were critical

in stimulating school engagement. They spontaneously insisted that their most important reason for coming to school through the years had been to meet with their friends. They experienced that their lives had been lived at school because almost everybody that mattered to them were *there* several hours every day. Although some pointed out that their friends were not primarily motivated to excel in academics, they all agreed on one thing: most of their friends had graduation as a strong priority, and were on the whole prepared to do what was asked of them. In addition, their friends` parents and their boy/girlfriends` parents turned out to be sources of support.

In the end they reported that it was this network of support that had helped them get back on track and graduate. While talking about these remotivating processes during middle and high school, the college students expressed feelings of coping and pride because they had managed to succeed and graduate. Descriptions of such coping experiences were completely absent in the interviews with those who had dropped out of school. Those who described accumulating mental health problems during school years through school dropout and beyond, and those developing symptoms in the aftermath of dropout, all described their mother as their main source of social support. They reported little access to resources or social support from sources outside the family. When asked explicitly about other sources of support, almost all said that, as far as they could remember, there had not been anyone else, and that they had not experienced that any of their teachers had provided this kind of motivating support. The participants that described having learning difficulties before dropping out reported that no one at school had contributed effective or long-term support to assist them in coping with these problems. They were left to fend for themselves, and eventually gave up on learning. Those reporting socio-emotional problems before dropping out

experienced the same absence of reactions. Whether they informed their teachers about being bullied or not, did not make much difference in their experience. "Nothing changed", some commented. Nothing much seemed to have changed at school when they developed mental health problems either. Most of them did not confide in their teachers, and their mental health problems seemed not to be noticed at school and were just not addressed in any way. Their descriptions conveyed an experience of flying under the radar and not being discovered without understanding why. However, many of them expressed in one way or another that they had wanted more personal and supportive relationships with their teachers.

Results from the clinical interviews confirmed the subjective experiences of mental disorders described by the participants in the qualitative interviews. In total, the dropout group fulfilled the criteria for thirteen diagnoses as diagnosed with the M.I.N.I and the graduate group fulfilled the criteria for four. Among those who had dropped out five were diagnosed with two or more mental disorders, while only one of the college students were diagnosed with more than one. The diagnoses found in the dropout group were Depressive/unipolar disorders, Bipolar disorders, Agoraphobic/panic disorders, Social anxiety disorders, Generalized anxiety disorders, and Alcohol-related disorders. The diagnoses found in the college group were Depressive disorders, Social anxiety disorders and Alcohol-related disorders.

4.0. Discussion

4.1. Study 1: School dropout and early employment

This study was conducted to explore how young people who had dropped out of school experienced their processes of dropout from school and employment and how they described their pathways to dropout. Although these pathways were described as individual and varied, the interviews converged on six main themes: (1) "Abandonment," (2) "Amotivation", (3) "Social awkwardness", (4) "Social exclusions and loneliness", (5) "Public autonomy and private dependency", (6) "Explanations and Interpretations of dropping out". However, the theme most consistently reappearing in the interviews were descriptions of abandonment, particularly in the parent-child relationship.

Initially the participants were asked some basic questions about their experiences with school and employment. Most of them responded to these questions by spontaneously talking about their family history. Their stories were organized according to turning points in their family life. They reported experiences of being separated from one or both attachment figures through adoption, foster placement, divorce, parent moving far away, or not keeping in touch. Some participants from single-parent families described how their co-habiting parent became less accessible to them. Some single parents were described as being preoccupied with social, financial and work related concerns, and the participants thus felt unable to add to the burden by sharing their own problems. Others reported how they lost contact when one parent formed a new family where they felt out of place. The participants described feelings of separation and being alone with problems they could not solve. These descriptions seemed particularly relevant since

several important developmental tasks are resolved within the context of childhood and adolescent attachment relationships (Rice, 1990; Sroufe et al., 2005). The securely attached child is theorized to be confident that its caretaker will be available, to explore the environment freely, to seek the caregiver when distressed, and to be easily soothed. The insecure avoidant child does not use the caregiver as a safe haven or a base for exploring the environment; this child is theorized to be very independent and do not seek to be comforted by the caregiver when distressed. (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978).). The "Abandonment" described by the participants was often contingent on their parents' divorce and being separated from one parent during childhood. Living in single-parent families may carry a risk of economic disadvantage, reduced emotional support and supervision (Amato, 2005). The consequences of divorce are, however, moderated by protective factors like stability in living conditions and authoritative parenting. The protective function of authoritative parenting involves emotional support and responsiveness to the child`s needs combined with ongoing supervision and high expectations (Amato, 2005). As to the latter, almost all participants described that they had not felt any academic expectations from their parents, and due to destabilized family situations parental supervision in general was less accessible for most of them for long periods of time. For example, they could not recall conversations with their parents about education or employment and thus had little knowledge about their parental education or job title and work experiences. Accordingly, the participants had not been able to learn from parental experiences in these areas.

Although many outcome variables related to child adaption seem to be affected by divorce, some research indicates a particularly strong effect of divorce on academic achievement (Størksen et al., 2006). Eight years (on average) after their parental

divorce, the adolescents reported more academic problems than those whose parents had stayed together. Although their results were in line with other research (Amato & Keith, 1991), Størksen and colleagues (2006) argue that the particularly strong effect of divorce on school-related problems that they found may be related to the participants' age. They speculate that while acting out may be a more natural way of reacting to negative life events in childhood, school problems may be a more natural reaction during adolescence due to the increase in academic demands during this period. However, the variability within the parental divorce group was larger than in the no parental divorce group, indicating that only some children`s academic achievement is negatively affected by divorce (Størksen et al., 2006). In the present study, long-term experiences of abandonment seemed to involve cumulative negative consequences for school engagement. The participants described for example how divorce led to moving, increased responsibility for siblings and changing schools, followed by other adversities like for example loneliness or being bullied. However, the effect of such individual stress factors may not become immediately evident for children and their caregivers. The consequences of earlier and later experiences are cumulative or become apparent only in the context of other risk factors (Sroufe, Coffino & Carlson, 2010). Interestingly, for those who do experience the negative influences of parental divorce, these influences have been found to have a continuing effect on children years after their parents split up and the influences may even increase over time (Størksen et al., 2006; Chase-Landsdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995; Cherlin, Chase-Landsdale, & McRae, 1998).

Attachment theory suggests a continued importance of attachment figures during adolescence and into young adulthood (Allen, 2008). Both theory and research describe the development of a *new balance* between parental attachment behavior and the

increasing exploratory needs of children as they pass through childhood and adolescence. Among the most consistent findings in attachment research are studies finding that when adolescents with secure attachment states of mind are in conflict with their parents, they cope by entering into productive problem-solving discussions (Allen, 2008). However, the participants described family situations allowing only infrequent contact with one or both of the parents. They reported feeling a need to protect the parent they lived with by not talking about problems at school, or, problems with adjusting to new family constellations. These were all experiences that made it complicated to renegotiate attachment relationships and thus *gradually* gain autonomy. They described ending up with too much autonomy too soon. Reluctance to rely on parents is referred to as detachment in the literature, and is consistently linked to poor psychological adaption (Desjardins & Leadbeater, 2017; Ingoglia, Lo Coco, Liga, & Lo Cricchio, 2011; Jager, Yuen, Putnick, Hendricks, & Bornstein, 2015). On the other hand, the models of parental involvement most often linked to high academic achievement are those emphasizing general supervision of children's learning activities, particularly when parents have high expectations, maintain communications about school activities and help develop good reading habits (Castro et al., 2015).

However, the attachment concept includes both the child`s tendency to use the caregiver as a safe haven in distress and the use of the caregiver as a secure base from which the child can explore the world (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1969/1982). In addition to describing prior experiences of "Abandonment", the participants also described their attempts to explore more recent challenges like high school and the transition to employment. Most of them described their coping with these developmental tasks as characterized by passivity (not participating in class activities), confrontation (conflicts

with teachers, bosses, peers and co-workers), and avoidance (withdrawing into their homes, playing data games at night and sleeping during the day, or avoiding social intercourse). They described a state of "Amotivation" characterized by a lack of exploratory behavior. These stories were in line with other studies suggesting that young people who drop out of school, tend to have a more external locus of control, and feel that their destiny is out of their hands (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack & Rock, 1986; Rumberger, 1983), thus making exploration useless. Consequently, most participants seemed to describe little of the exploration of educational and vocational environments and other productive problems-solving behaviors that are needed to renegotiate autonomy in adolescence. Such exploratory behaviors are confirmed to be typical of adolescents with secure attachment states of mind (Allen, 2008; Vignoli, Croity-Belz, Chapeland, Fillipis, & Garcia, 2005).

The second important finding, called "Amotivation", emerged particularly clearly when participants were asked about the possibility of re-enrolling in school. The answers, however, also indicated some ambivalence. Several expressed thoughts about education as an instrument to achieve better opportunities in life, and re-enrolment as something they *ought* to do. At the same time, they seemed to think of re-enrolling as a futile project associated with a history of academic or social failure and strong negative emotions. Some even bluntly refused any thought of re-enrolling. Participants explained their reluctance with prior school experiences of boredom and of school being irrelevant to their lives. They were tired of "theory". In general, the top three reasons given by students to explain dropping out of school were "classes were not interesting" or that they were "bored" or "not motivated" (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morrison, 2006; Markussen & Seland, 2012). Markussen and Seland (2012) suggested that the "boredom" and "tired

of theory" explanations, might be related to academic failure resulting in low self-efficacy and amotivation. In accordance with this explanation, half of our participants described a kind of school-related hopelessness, lingering behind academically, and developing negative ability and effort beliefs resulting in low self-efficacy. Thinking about the effort needed to redirect this negative development seemed to overwhelm them. Negative school experiences had reduced their "beliefs in their capabilities to produce desired effects by their own actions" (Bandura, 1997, p. vii). It is precisely such experiences with lack of control that are at the core of the concept of amotivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2002).

However, their lack of academic motivation might have additional sources. For example, the participants knew surprisingly little about their parents` experiences with education and employment. Markussen (2016b) argues that parents with less education do not push their children to achieve and complete school because they themselves have managed without much education, and thus develop an ambivalent attitude towards the value of education. The result for some children may be a feeling of being left alone with important decisions, making them totally dependent on their own internal motivation. Most of our participants were from working class families and had parents with little or no higher education. Markussen and colleagues (2011) remark that the academic experience of parents seems to influence how their children understand the purpose of education and thus affects their engagement in school. When parents talk to their children about education and work, their own values and attitudes are communicated to the child, and when significant adults openly value academic success, children are more likely to succeed at school (Astill et al., 2002; Legault et al., 2006). Missing out on such conversations may contribute to making several working class students enter middle

and high school "predisposed to nonparticipation and nonidentification" (Finn, 1989, p. 130). Although some Norwegian politicians have intended to reduce such social differences in education through governmental funding, this reduction of inequality has proven difficult. Recent statistics from the Statistics Norway (SN) shows that the higher the parental SES, the more likely their children were to graduate high school and complete a bachelor`s or master`s degree (Hansen & Mastekaasa, 2010). Among young adults (19-24years) of parents with higher education in Norway, 59% were enrolled in college or university studies (Ekren, 2014). In comparison, among young adults who had parents that ended their education after middle school, only 16% were enrolled in higher education. Furthermore, 80% of the boys in vocational tracks with low-educated parents dropped out of school (Ekren, 2014). Accordingly, low parental education may partly explain the reported absence of motivating conversations on education and employment. Nonetheless, the "Abandonment" descriptions may offer an additional explanation. When families are stressed by destabilization, the parent-child relationships seem to suffer, and time spent together may decrease (Kalmijn, 2013). Thus, the "Amotivation" described by the participants can also be understood as a broad effect of unmet needs, just like Legault and her colleagues (2006) defined the concept of amotivation.

The third and fourth themes from our data, named "Social awkwardness" and "Social exclusion and loneliness", included two types of problems regarding the participant`s relationships outside the family, mostly with peers, teachers, bosses and work colleagues, indicating disturbances in their development of social competence. Some participants described experiences of "Social exclusion and loneliness" including social withdrawal, social rejection and unsuccessful struggles in establishing positive

relationships during school years and later at work. Other participants focused more on a confrontational or dismissive attitude, describing how they reacted with obstinacy, non-compliance in class or getting into fights with peers at school. Some of the male participants explained how they were sensitive to potential provocation particularly in interaction with authority figures at school or at work, resulting in repeated conflicts and negative sanctions. Their general susceptibility to provocation had also caused negative responses from their peer group at school over the years. These descriptions are particularly interesting due to the emphasis placed on peer relationships as an influence in social, behavioural and cognitive development (Parker & Asher, 1987). Among the strongest associations to children`s peer relationships are subsequent participation in school-related activities and school achievement (O`Neil, Welsh, Parke, Wang, & Strand, 1997; Parker & Asher, 1987). Even when controlling for early academic skills and attention problems, early peer relationships predicted important academic outcomes (Rabiner, Godwin, & Dodge, 2016). Problematic peer relationships during childhood increase the risk of various adolescent, school-related difficulties, for example school truancy and school dropout (Woodward & Fergusson, 2000).

However, in our sample, the participants with problematic peer-relationships also described family backgrounds characterized by single parenthood, parental change (divorce, separation, and remarriage), separation from one or both parents and preoccupied and emotionally stressed parents with relatively low socioeconomic status. Thus, several factors may be involved in explaining the school dropout of participants with problematic peer-relationships in our study. Nevertheless, Woodward and Fergusson (2000) pointed in particular to substantial intellectual and behavioural differences between children with and without early problems with peers. Peer

difficulties tended to be related to more pervasive problems with behavior and attention. Stenseng, Belsky, Skalicka, and Wichstrøm (2014, 2016) demonstrated long-term effects of social exclusion when they found that social exclusion at age 4 predicted more aggression, less cooperation and more symptoms of ADHD at age 6. These kinds of problems seem to predict low academic achievement over time, and eventually school dropout (Evensen, Lyngstad, Melkevik, & Mykletun, 2016b; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). In line with these results, Sroufe and his colleagues (2005) found behavior problems in sixth the grade to be the most powerful predictor of school dropout. Thus, the "Social awkwardness" that some participants reported from their years at school may have contributed to their disengagement processes in several ways. For example, children who are poorly accepted by other students at school are more prone to affiliate with maladapted peers (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Fergusson, Woodward & Horwood, 1999), and they struggle to build positive relationships with their teachers (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997). Both these factors are found to be associated with poor school achievement and school dropout (Baker, 2006; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000).

A few participants described a different pattern of attitudes and behaviours. They reported how early experiences of being rejected, victimized or ignored by peers, had resulted in gradual withdrawal, sadness, anxiousness and avoidance of social contexts. This kind of childhood victimization has been found to correlate with internalizing problems in late adolescence (Schwartz, Lansford, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 2015; Zwierzynska, Wolke, & Lereya, 2013). However, research on the effects of internalizing problems on school dropout seems to indicate that such effects are mainly due to the presence of externalizing problems (Breslau 2010; Esch et al., 2014). Children with

externalising problems may not be accepted by their peers, and gradually becoming more withdrawn. In line with this explanation, some of the participants in our study described how they started out feeling excluded or being bullied, responding aggressively at first but gradually becoming more withdrawn. Thus, almost all participants, whether they described being conflict prone or timid or withdrawn, described loneliness and feelings of being marginalized during their school years and in the aftermath of school dropout. They all seemed to described what Baumeister and Leary (1995) have called an unfulfilled need-to-belong. The limited number of friends in their lives, the fact that their peer contact took place almost exclusively online, and that they rarely participated in organized social activities or felt a sense of belonging to a peer group, may have contributed to their feelings of loneliness. However, students with friends may feel lonely, even if they are accepted at school, and students without a friend need not feel lonely (Koster, 2008). Loneliness bears directly on feelings, not on sociometric data. The "Abandonment" described by the participants included their perceived loneliness at school. Consequently, feelings of loneliness seemed to be pervasive in these interviews. Frostad et al., (2015) suggest that loneliness claims a primary position in the explaining of intentions to quit school. In their study of factors contributing to the intention to leave school in upper secondary education, they unexpectedly found loneliness to be a much stronger predictor than peer acceptance and friendship (Frostad et al., 2015).

The fifth theme indicated by the participants was their feeling of independence and being in control of their own lives. These descriptions were surprising to the interviewers, since financially the participants depended heavily on social services. None of them had steady regular jobs, and most of them participated in activities or jobs

provided by the NLWA. Two of them talked spontaneously of their financial dependency, but most had to be reminded of this dependency and even then did not seem to recognize this reality as a limitation of their independence. This lack of worry may be a consequence of what Oreopoulos (2007) referred to as young people`s tendency to be myopic or "near-sighted" in the sense that they emphasized the present, where they were provided for, more than the future where the NLWA might reduce or withdraw their economic assistance. This kind of "near-sightedness" may of course be shared by people in various age groups. Moreover, the participants had managed to become financially independent of their parents. It is possible that they experienced this as financial independence, and by focusing on this achievement felt they had solved an important task of young adulthood, thus succeeding to protect their self-esteem. In their difficult life situations protecting self-esteem seemed to be particularly challenging and at the same time essential. Nevertheless, there seemed to be a lack of realism in these answers that might at times interfere with financial planning and strategic life decisions. Positive illusions about the self (I am independent) may instigate positive affect, but does not always enhance constructive coping or learning, and may be associated with long-term costs (Crocker & Park, 2003). That said, the relationship between self-esteem and realism is a trade-off for most people (Baumeister & Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003).

Finally, at the end of the interview, the participants were asked directly how they would explain their dropout from school. Most of them blamed their own "Amotivation", and talked about how they could have coped better with the school challenges if only they had exercised more "willpower". Reegård and Rogstad (2016a) argue that there has been a shift in values, increasing the importance of education, and making decisions

about school and employment particularly demanding for young people. Young people are expected to actively choose their future, and if they fail, there is no one else to blame, because the choices they made were their own. In line with these explanations, the participants often seemed to blame themselves and their lack of willpower and effort when asked for explicit explanations of school dropout. Earlier in the interviews, however, they also described unique disengagement processes focusing on "Abandonment", "Social awkwardness", and "Social exclusion and Loneliness", as well as learning difficulties, and pregnancies. *This combination of explicitly taking responsibility while implicitly giving a more complex explanation* seems to be in line with results from a study by Kortering and Braziel (1999). In their study participants also focused on the need to change their attitudes and habits, and making an effort to "try harder", "raise one`s goals" and "not get into trouble". To increase school completion and reduce dropout, however, the participants suggested changes involving effort by other people such as the need for more individualized help, more caring teachers, and peers with more positive attitudes (Kortering & Braziel, 2002).

Lacking available adults in their lives, participants interviewed in our study described being overly challenged when faced with developmental tasks like establishing mature relationships with peers of both sexes, developing school-related skills such as reading and writing, and attaining (appropriate) independence. They also experienced challenges related to the development of skills like self-efficacy and self-regulation, skills that are essential for school completion and productive occupation. According to Havighurst (1972), failure to cope with some of these important developmental tasks might result in maladaption and negative social responses, making the participants` less able to successfully complete later developmental tasks.

Nevertheless, graduates too experience failure and stress. It would be unrealistic to expect consistent positive adjustment across diverse cognitive, behavioral and emotional capacities in normally developing children (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). However, what the participants described was not a history of coping disturbed by scattered periods of challenging and stressful experiences that they eventually had overcome. Overviewing the results of study 1, a long-term accumulation of various risk factors constituting an increasing challenge to their individual resilience was the one thing *all* the participants` descriptions had in common. In line with these descriptions, there are developmental models focusing on *the number of risk factors* rather than the nature of the factors in predicting underachievement (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). The presence of two or more risk factors does seem to put children at risk of academic failure (Lucio et al., 2012). Lucio and his colleagues (2012) included risk factors like being low on academic engagement, low academic expectations ,low academic self-efficacy, poor homework completion, low school engagement and few positive relations, and high school mobility, and high school misbehavior. All participants in our study described at least two of these risk factors in addition to others not included by Lucio and his colleagues (2012).

Summing up, participants described different pathways to school dropout, and their descriptions of individual pathways were characterized by the presence of multiple risk factors. That said, when asked explicitly about causal factors, the participants themselves focused on their motivation and effort in the form of lacking "will power". Implicitly, the various descriptions of their disengagement processes converged on abandonment, feelings of loneliness and amotivation. What these somewhat conflicting

descriptions suggested was that, when competency beliefs and experiences of mastery are scarce, the need for guidance is extensive, and the consequences of abandonment may be aggravated (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).

It is, however, essential to keep in mind that our sample was strategic, and included one particular subgroup of young people who had dropped out of high school, namely those not enrolled in school nor in stable employment, and thus being off track. Most of the early school leavers, however, cope resiliently by finding satisfactory work or returning to school (Dekkers & Claassen, 2001). Surprisingly, research on the less resilient students in off-track dropout processes is limited. Moreover, since most dropout studies are quantitative, we know relatively little about their *subjective experiences* with high school and their transition into employment. Thus, it is noteworthy that the young people struggling the most to adjust after school dropout chose to focus so much on their experiences with unavailable adults, dismissive peers and an unfulfilled need-to-belong. They seemed to give problems with "Abandonment", Social awkwardness" and "Social exclusion and loneliness" more relevance in their individual dropout processes than what might have been expected from Rumberger and Lim`s (2008) review on factors predicting school dropout. The way the participants explicitly blame their own amotivation while implicitly describing relationship problems, seems to suggest a possible connection between these themes. The participants seemed to experience that relationships with adults and peers played a prominent role in the motivational dynamics leading to school dropout. Obviously, further studies are needed to identify the motivational and demotivational factors crucial to their school continuation. Furthermore, it might be useful to develop an overview of relevant research investigating the influence of close relationships in high school dropout processes.

4.2. Study 2: Parent-child relationships, academic performance and the process of high school dropout: A narrative review.

In the second study, we reviewed research literature on the indirect relationship between caregiver-child attachment and academic performance. This focus gave us an opportunity to include research literature on the relationship between attachment quality and cognitive development during preschool years. As these studies are seldom incorporated when summing up research on school dropout, we found this to be an interesting contribution to understanding the school dropout *process.* To structure our search for potential mechanisms of influence linking attachment quality to school dropout processes, we focused on four mediating mechanism suggested by Ijzendoorn and colleagues (1995): the attachment-teaching hypothesis, the attachment-exploration hypothesis, the hypothesis, the social network hypothesis and the attachment-cooperation hypothesis. The review revealed a comprehensive amount of research linking attachment to self-regulation and self-regulation to academic performance and school dropout. Evidence of association between quality of parent-child attachment and subsequent quality of teacher-child relationships were also consistent, as were evidence of correlation between teacher child-relationships and academic performance. This evidence supported the two first mediation hypotheses of Ijzendoorn and colleagues (1995). Although some correlational evidence supported the attachment-teaching hypothesis and the attachment-cooperation hypothesis as well, these studies were relatively scarce in comparison. Thus, the review found that the *prerequisites* for mediation of attachment on academic achievement were found for all four mediation mechanisms, but the evidence were more comprehensive for the first two mechanisms. However, only O`Connor and McCartney (2007) and West and colleagues (2013) tested

statistically for *mediation*. Although these two studies offered support for all the four

hypotheses suggested by Ijzendoorn and colleagues (1995), the scarcity of studies

testing for statistically significant mediation effects made concluding premature.

In research literature, there is a general agreement that dropout is a gradual process of

disengagement influenced by many interacting factors, including several outside the

school environment (Finn, 1989; Janosz et al., 2000; Rumberger & Lim, 2008;

Markussen, 2010). Academic performance, family- related factors, behavioural factors,

social factors and personality factors all seem to contribute in the school dropout

process (Rumberger, 2006). In research on family-related factors attachment quality is

not among the most prominent. Even attachment researchers seem to have been

somewhat reluctant to investigate the relationship between attachment quality and

academic performance or school dropout. Furthermore, there are other factors that may

be stronger predictors, like socioeconomic status or stressful life events (Alexander et

al., 2001; Duncan & Magnuson, 2011). On the other hand, school dropout research has

emerged partly due to a strong political and social agenda aimed at helping children

thrive in school, cope with academic challenges, and eventually graduate from

secondary education. Consequently, it is essential to investigate malleable predictors

that can be effectively influenced through family, school and community interventions.

Within this perspective, parent-child relationships in general and attachment quality in

particular may be among the more relevant factors in dropout research. Sensitivity and

attachment interventions have been found to be rather effective in changing insensitive

parenting and infant insecurity (Bakermans-Kranenburg, Ijzendoorn, & Juffer, 2003).

When interventions were most effective in enhancing parental sensitivity, they were

also most effective in positively changing attachment security. In more recent years, the

Circle of Security Parenting (COS-P) intervention has also been reported to provide a promising instrument for reducing disorganized or insecure attachment in at-risk pre-schoolers (Hoffman, Marvin, Cooper, & Powell, 2006). The COS-P is a psychoeducative program based on attachment theory aimed at improving parenting behavior in general and attachment security in particular (Berlin, Zeanah, & Lieberman, 2008). Attachment interventions based in school are rarely reported in the research literature, although Lieberman (1992) argued that strategies used when working with insecure mother-child dyads were relevant when making school-based interventions. Kennedy and Kennedy (2004) suggested that Lieberman`s strategies were also applicable when working with teacher-student relationships. Accordingly, if children at risk of school dropout can be identified at an early age, effective interventions for improving parent-child attachment are available.

Finn (1989) developed a model of the school dropout process where he focused on the motivational processes preceding dropout. He argued that parents are essential in motivating children to engage in school, and that a lack of this support predisposed children not to identify with school values and not to participate in school activities. Supportive of this view, school performance (grades) has been found more important in predicting school dropout than abilities measured in standard test scores (Ekstrom et al., 1986). Thus, factors other than cognitive abilities may be important in these learning processes. Typical dropout students seem to perform below their abilities as early as by third grade (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989). School success and graduation may depend on children`s motivation to exercise and develop these abilities as well. Parent-child relationships in general and attachment quality in particular seem to hold some promise as factors likely to influence these long-term motivational processes.

However, long-term studies of the influence of parent-child relationships on school

dropout rates were rare (Barry & Reschly, 2012), and surprisingly few dropout studies

included measures of attachment quality or preschool development. The latter is

surprising, given the strong focus in attachment theory on explaining child adjustment

and maladjustment (Cassidy, Jones, & Shaver, 2013). This lack of attachment measures

in school dropout research leaves us with an incomplete picture of the developmental

course from infancy to the dropout event. What we do know so far is that school dropout

processes are most often characterized by a disappointing achievement history

(Hickman, Bartholomew, Mathwig, & Heinrich, 2008; Markussen et al., 2011). This line

of research suggests that all other factors associated with school dropout, such as social

factors, personality factors, behavioural factors or family-related factors have a more

indirect effect by influencing academic achievement (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Janosz

et al., 1997). Consequently, it seems relevant to investigate further the factors affecting

school dropout via academic performance. When it comes to the attachment factor in

particular, Bowlby himself never indicated a direct effect of attachment on academic

performance. Thus, to understand the association between attachment and academic

performance, we need to look for mediators, factors that may explain the positive

association suggested between secure attachment and factors like developmental

quotient and language competency (Ijzendoorn et al., 1995). Some evidence has

suggested that attachment quality is a predictor of school achievement all the way to

graduation (Moss, St-Laurent, Dubois-Comtois, & Cyr, 2005). Nonetheless, the

mechanisms explaining these associations need further clarification.

To develop an overview of the research on mediating mechanisms that might explain an

indirect link between attachment and academic performance and eventually school

dropout proved complicated. There was a lack of coherence in the literature. The effects of important mediators like teacher-child relationships, peer relationships and behavior problems were reviewed separately, while studies of other potential mediators were more scattered. The lack of review studies integrating research on the various mediating mechanisms left us with an incoherent understanding of present knowledge. Thus, we set out to provide such an overview. To do this, we needed to integrate results on four mechanisms mediating between attachment and academic performance into one narrative review.

Within the complex literature on potential mediating mechanisms, Ijzendoorn and colleagues (1995) provided some structure by suggesting a model of four main mechanisms. This model helped us organize the studies included in the review. The four mechanisms are presented as hypotheses. The first, the *attachment-teaching* hypothesis, suggests that the child develops a secure attachment relationship with the caregiver through sensitive and responsive parenting. This positive parent-child interaction will provide the child with a pathway to school success through better caregiver instructions and more helpful scaffolding, thus providing a high-quality learning environment. The second mechanism is the *attachment-exploration* hypothesis. This hypothesis suggests that children who have learned appropriate self-regulation and thus are not distracted by unmet emotional needs, can concentrate on exploring the environment, and thus may enter on a pathway to school success. The third is the *social-network* hypothesis, providing a pathway through the development of positive relationships with people outside of the family. By internalizing experiences of secure attachment, children develop cognitive structures for interpreting and coping with new relationships (Bowlby, 1969/1982). The development of close relationships and the interaction with

various people provide the child with more cognitive stimulation, and thus contribute to school success. Finally, a fourth pathway, the *attachment-cooperation* hypothesis, suggests that performance situations at school may also be a test of socio-emotional development. Securely attached children are hypothesized to be more confident in relationships outside the family, for example with teachers. Thus, they become more able than insecure children to behave in ways that provide them with the support and information necessary to cope with tests and school tasks (Ijzendoorn et al., 1995). Looking further into the scientific support for the various hypothesis, I shall start with the attachment-exploration hypothesis and the social-network hypothesis as they seem to have generated the most comprehensive support.

A relatively large part of the research literature on mediating mechanisms tested hypotheses which we perceived to be related to the *attachment-exploration hypothesis*. These studies investigated attachment quality as a potential prerequisite for learning appropriate exploration and problem-solving skills. In line with this prediction, securely attached children were found to spend more time exploring, and demonstrated more effective exploration behavior than insecure children (Belsky, Garduque, & Hrncir, 1984; Hazen & Durrett, 1982; Main, 1983; van den Boom, 1994). Securely attached children found effective coping strategies in new or threatening situations, strategies enabling them to turn off the attachment system and refocus outside of the dyadic relationship (Schieche & Spangler, 2005). Focusing outside of the parent-child dyad permitted more positive affect in problem-solving situations and persistence in problem-solving tasks (Matas, Arend, & Sroufe, 1978). The secure children coped better because they cooperated better with their mothers by being more compliant and seeking more appropriate help than the insecure children. Accordingly, there were differences in the

quality of assistance generated by children in various attachment categories. Insecure children were found to stimulate premature assistance from the caregiver, thereby reducing their potential to learn in problem-solving situations (Coleman & Thompson, 2002; Schieche & Spangler, 2005). Securely attached children demonstrated better efficiency in their help-seeking behavior. They protected the attachment relationship by communicating their need for co-regulation (Crugnola et al., 2011), hence making "guided self-regulation" possible (Sroufe et al., 2005: 107). What the research literature suggested was that the parent-child interaction in the secure dyads provided a better scaffolding for problem-solving activities.

One important prerequisite for regulating emotions is the ability to recognize and put emotions into words by learning internal state language (Lemche et al., 2007). This learning also takes place within the parent-child relationship. Accordingly, securely attached children were found to use more internal state language than insecure children, thus providing them with essential means to regulate emotion (Lemche et al., 2007). Attachment quality has also been linked to children`s understanding of emotions in general (De Rosnay & Harris, 2002). Interestingly, a new direction in research is now linking children`s emotionality and regulatory capabilities with their cognition and learning, accumulating results from research on a wide range of cognitive abilities (Blair & Dennis, 2010; Gauvin, 2005). Generally, this research seems to suggest that success at school depends partly on an optimal emotion-cognition balance providing an arousal level suited for learning, and again, underscore the importance of emotion regulation in school learning. Furthermore, emotion regulation also belongs to a hierarchy of self-regulation, and self-regulation is an important predictor of academic performance (Blair & Diamond, 2008; McClelland & Camron, 2011; Sektnan, McClelland, Acock, & Morrison;

2008). Consequently, children with a low ability of regulating their behavior in kindergarten showed a higher risk of school dropout than their more well-regulated peers (Vitaro, Brendgen, Larose, & Tremblay, 2005).Thus, the evidence suggests that co-construction in secure dyads may provide better learning environments partly due to the development of emotion-regulation skills like appropriate help-seeking, the use of internal state language and the maintenance of an optimal emotion cognition balance; all skills that may contribute to the development of behavior regulation. The concept of co-construction alludes to the process of shared effort in which parents help their children to interpret and understand the external and internal world of the child. The child processes these experiences and internalizes the knowledge gained. In this sense, parents and children are co-constructing the child`s mind and knowledge about the world, including knowledge about the self and about the self with others (Goldstein, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978).

Furthermore, emotion regulation skills may be of particular relevance in school dropout processes due to their hypothesized link with social adaption and the development of psychopathology. According to attachment theory, children develop cognitive affective psychological structures moulded by their quality of interaction with caregivers (Bowlby, 1969/1982). These structures help children interpret interactions in later relationships, and act as guidelines for children`s expressions of emotion and for their behavior with other people. Some children develop guidelines that contribute to adaption and serve as protective factors in their mental health development, while other children develop guidelines that contribute to maladaption and may serve as risk factors for psychopathology (Carlson, 1998). Following this line of thinking, psychopathology emerges as a potential mediator between attachment quality and academic

performance. Insecure early attachment experiences may provide children with internal guidelines that put them at risk of further negative experiences and the development of psychopathology. When children become distracted by symptoms of psychopathology this redirection of attention will reduce their ability to explore the environment and in turn may negatively influence learning and academic performance. The empirical testing of these hypotheses, however, has resulted in a diversity of studies and designs, making comparisons and generalizations difficult. Nevertheless, a comprehensive meta-analysis did find an association between disorganized and insecure attachment and externalizing symptoms in the form of under-controlled behavior (Fearon, Bakermans-Kranenburg, Ijzendoorn, Lapsley, & Roisman, 2010). In addition, several studies found a significant association between secure attachment and positive adaption (Bohlin, Hagekull, & Rydell, 2000; Boldt, Kochanska, Yoon, & Nordling, 2014; Easterbrooks & Abeles, 2000; Jakobsen, Horwood & Fergusson, 2012)). However, when looking for the potential mediation effect of internalizing symptoms like anxiety, depression and over-controlled behavior (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000), results were less convincing. Although there was some support for significant associations between insecure attachment and internalization, this effect was characterized as surprisingly weak compared to the associations between insecure and disorganized attachment and externalizing symptoms (Groh et al., 2012). Thus, psychopathology in the form of externalizing symptoms showed some promise as a potential mediator between attachment and academic performance. Nevertheless, to establish the hypothesized mediation, one must also demonstrate an association between behavioural problems and academic performance. This link, between behavior problems and underachievement and underattainment, however, was found to be quite consistent (Bub, McCartney, & Willett, 2007; Fergusson & Horwood, 1998; Sroufe et al., 2005).

Summing up so far, the research literature provided some support for an association between attachment and various kinds of self-regulation, and between self-regulation and academic performance. Hence, these results provided an important prerequisite for mediation, although they did not establish statistically significant mediation effects. Only two studies were found to provide such effects: Children securely attached at 36 months demonstrated better school performance in first grade, partly and significantly mediated by self-regulation (West et al., 2013). O`Connor and McCartney (2007) found that attachment at 36 months predicted cognitive skills in the 6th grade, and that this association was mediated partly by child exploration. Thus, two long-term studies actually investigated and provided results supporting a *mediation effect* of self-regulation/exploration between attachment quality and academic performance.

This far we have looked at a mediating mechanism that from an early age shows a potential to influence the development of cognitive skills. The early experiences with caregiver assistance in the development of self-regulation have been hypothesized to be internalized into internal working models (IWMs) (Bowlby, 1969/1982). These models were theorized to serve as guidelines for coping with future relationships. This may turn out to be of importance since children grow, attend kindergarten and primary school, and relationships outside the child-caregiver dyad gain new relevance. Accordingly, the mediating mechanism, called the *social net-work hypothesis,* suggests that early attachment quality influences the child`s ability to bond with teachers and peers, and that the quality of these new relationships may influence the child`s access to cognitive stimulation (Ijzendoorn et al., 1995). Several meta-analyses have concluded on small to moderate associations between attachment quality and peer relationship competence (Groh et al., 2014; Pallini et al., 2014; Schneider, Atkinson, & Tardif, 2001). Thus,

substantial research has supported the hypothesis that early attachment prepares the child for entering into and coping with new relationships. In line with this thinking, secure IWMs were also found to correlate with low degree of peer conflict (Raikes, Virmani, Thompson, & Hatton, 2013). Keeping relationship conflict to a minimum may contribute to an optimal cognitive-emotional balance, thus allowing for more cognitive stimulation and better learning (Blair & Dennis, 2010; Gauvin, 2005). Furthermore, children low on social competence with peers have been found to increase their risk of rejection, maladjustment, truancy, suspension and school dropout, while peer acceptance was found to uniquely and positively influence academic progress (Buhs & Ladd, 2001; Gorrese & Ruggieri, 2012; Kingery et al., 2011; Ladd et al., 1997; Woodward & Fergusson, 2000; Zettergren, 2003). Finally, rejected and maladjusted students seem to seek each other's company. Associating with disruptive students or joining antisocial friendship groups seems to negatively affect academic attitudes, motivation, effort, performance and school completion (Bellmore, 2011; Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011; Woodward & Fergusson, 2000). Particularly at risk of such consequences are children with behavioural problems who are not able to gain acceptance from their prosocial peers nor from their teachers. They in particular have an increased risk of dropping out of school (Baker, 1998; Bellmore, 2011; Cohn, 1990; Lansford, Malone, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 2010; Parker & Asher, 1987).

As children start spending more time outside their family home, they engage in an increasing number of new relationships. Relationships with peers are one kind of new relationships and relationships with teachers another kind. According to Ainsworth (1991), teachers might enter the role of secondary attachment figures. Others have suggested that the teacher-child relationship may have an "attachment component", or

that children use teachers as temporary attachment figures (Cassidy, 2008; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). Bowlby`s (1969/1982) prediction is that due to the guideline function of early IWMs, these new attachments will be influenced by prior experiences. Sabol and Pianta (2012) summed up research on the association between early child-caregiver attachment and later teacher-child attachment also referred to as 'concordance research'. They did find a moderate link between the two. Because teachers can form relatively close relationships with children, they seem to provide a source of potential support. Of particular interest is the possibility that positive teacher-child relationships may have a potential for buffering ongoing negative school trajectories. In line with this kind of thinking, some research suggests that harmonious relationships with teachers may have positive developmental consequences for children at risk *behaviourally and demographically* by improving their general adaption including their academic performance (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Studies on teachers` buffering effect on children at risk *academically* is quite limited and less consistent. Nevertheless, in general there is substantial support for the hypothesis that teacher-child-relationships have an effect on children`s school adaption in general and academic performance in particular (Baker, 2006; Baker, Grant, & Morlock, 2008; Berry & O'Connor, 2010; Gregory & Weinstein, 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Split et al., 2012). These studies in combination seem to provide considerable support for linking teacher-child relationships to both attachment and academic performance, thus providing a basis for a potential mediation effect.

Summing up, There is some evidence that the quality of early caregiver experiences internalized into IWMs may influence the child`s ability to form harmonious relationships with teachers and peers. Furthermore, limitations in the ability to bond with important people at school seem to be associated with a risk of negative

consequences for the development of children`s academic motivation and performance. In accordance with these results, Norwegian researchers recently found that loneliness at school and lack of teacher support were among the strongest predictors of the intention to leave school (Frostad et al., 2015). Outperforming "classic" predictors like academic achievement, loneliness was such a strong predictor that the researchers concluded that it "came close to claiming a prime position in explaining why some students start thinking about leaving secondary school early" (Frostad et al., 2015, p.119). In line with these results, one study that actually tested mediation effects found that social relationships (friends and teachers) were a significant mediating factor between early attachment and academic performance (West et al., 2013). O`Connor and McCartney (2007,) who also statistically tested mediation, found that the association between ambivalent attachment and cognitive skills was mediated by children`s communication skills in test situations. The association between insecure/other attachment and cognitive skills was mediated by several mediators among them children`s social relationships. The insecure/other category includes a mixture of insecure indices not fitting into any of the other insecure groups (avoidant, ambivalent or disorganized) (Solomon & George, 2008).

Another hypothesis suggesting mediation between attachment and school achievement and eventually school *dropout, was called the attachment-teaching hypothesis.* This mediation mechanism*,* is related to the development of a goal-corrected partnership. Bowlby (1969/1982) found this partnership to be essential to learning and adaptive development. Gradually the child develops more advanced cognitive abilities like taking the perspective of others and negotiating a joint task (Moss, Parent, Gosselin, & Dumont, 1993). The development of these abilities makes it possible for caregiver and child to

share goals and plans (Bowlby, 1969/1982). However, for the child to be able to apply the new cognitive skills to support the development of this goal-directed partnership, the child must have a chance to practice within a supportive relationship. According to the attachment-teaching hypothesis, this process depends on the caregiver`s ability to assist or scaffold the child`s metacognitive development (Ijzendoorn et al., 1995). When caregivers provide supportive frames and help their children to act competently, this interaction will foster communication that enables children to explore their competence more efficiently (Evans & Porter, 2009).

When it comes to the empirical testing of this hypothesis, results have been quite limited. Some studies, however, suggest that mothers of securely attached children give better assistance in problem-solving situations, thus giving less negative and more positive feedback, providing more high-quality tutoring, better atonement, more encouragement, and more relevant instructions to their children (Isabella & Belsky, 1991; Matas, Arend, & Sroufe, 1978; Meins, 1997; Ijzendoorn et al., 1995). Other studies indicate an association between high- quality maternal instructions and the child`s acquisition of cognitive strategies (Hartmann et al., 1989; Molfese, DiLalla, & Lovelace, 1996; Saltaris et al., 2004). Nonetheless, when it came to statistically testing mediation effects, only two studies were found to contribute, and in both studies parental quality of assistance was only one of several factors mediating the effect of attachment on school achievement (O`Connor & McCartney, 2007; West et al., 2013). Although the results on this mediating mechanism are promising, they are very limited. Thus, the attachment-teaching hypothesis does need further investigation before we can draw any conclusions about its contribution to explaining the link between attachment and academic performance.

Finally, the *attachment-cooperation* hypothesis suggests that securely attached children are more likely to cooperate in test situations, and that this cooperation may affect school achievement (Ijzendoorn et al., 1995). According to attachment theory, the children`s experiences with early dyadic interaction form the basis for their ability to cooperate in subsequent extra-dyadic relationships (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Thus, responsive and sensitive care will stimulate the development of positive models of the self (self-concepts) and trust in others, making securely attached children less anxious when away from their parents, and more able to comply with the demands of the test situation (Ijzendoorn et al., 1995).

In support of this theorizing, a meta-analysis concluded that insecure attachment in general and ambivalent attachment in particular were associated with anxiety (Colonnesi et al., 2011). Nevertheless, studies including SSP and linking attachment with test anxiety are rare, thus making further research essential before drawing any conclusions. Excluding test anxiety, other test behaviours have not been subject to comprehensive research. Nevertheless, communication with adults and sustained attention in test situations have been linked with attachment quality (Belsky & Fearon, 2002; Clarke et al., 2002; Gersten et al., 1986; Goldberg, 1997; Moss, et al., 2004). The other link necessary to establish a mediating mechanism is the one establishing significant associations between anxiety and academic performance. Two meta-analyses concluded that anxiety in performance situations negatively influenced school achievement (McDonald, 2001; Seipp, 1991). This association thus seemed to have more consistent support than the one between attachment and test anxiety. Nevertheless, two longitudinal studies did find a statistically significant mediation effect of test behavior,

indicating that this mechanism may explain part of the association between attachment and academic performance (West et al., 2013; O`Connor & McCartney, 2007). However, even if some results seem promising, the limited research literature concerning the fourth and last mediating mechanism suggested by Ijzendoorn and colleagues (1995) makes it premature to conclude on the role of test behavior in explaining the link between attachment quality and school achievement.

The purpose of this review was to bring together results concerning the mechanisms mediating between attachment quality and academic performance in order to develop a more unified picture of this knowledge. Studies on potential mediators like teacher-child relationships, peer-relationships, or self-regulation, had previously been reviewed separately, without being understood together in a more comprehensive model. Thus, we set out to disentangle the mechanisms that had achieved sufficient scientific support and accordingly could justify their inclusion in a tentative model of mediating mechanisms. The model based on this review shows that, according to the literature, all four mechanisms suggested by Ijzendoorn and his colleagues (1995) had some potential for explaining the link between attachment and academic performance. The literature demonstrated associations between parent-child attachment and a wide range of likely mediators, and these potential mediators in turn were also found to be associated with academic performance. Among the potential mediators with the most consistent associations to attachment and academic performance were self-regulation and teacher-child relationships.

Studies linking attachment to school dropout were relatively scarce while studies linking attachment to academic performance were more numerous. Most numerous

were studies investigating potential mediators between attachment and academic

performance. Academic performance is a factor held by many researchers to be the

strongest predictor of school dropout (Alexander el al., 2001; Audas & Willms, 2001;

Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Janosz, et al., 1997; Markussen et al., 2011). Furthermore,

substantial research seems to suggest that factors other than academic performance

that are associated with school dropout most likely have an indirect effect, influencing

dropout via their effect on academic performance (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Janosz et

al., 1997) Thus, we widened the search to include studies on the entire dropout process

by focusing on the association between attachment and academic performance. Some of

the potential mediators *directly* associated with academic performance, like high-quality

maternal scaffolding, were found to improve the development of metacognitive skills.

Such skills have been found to outweigh intelligence as a predictor of learning (Veenman

& Spaans, 2005). Other factors, for example externalizing behaviours, seemed to relate

more indirectly to academic performance through their association with school

maladaption. However, some mediators may also influence school dropout processes

mainly via school maladaption, and without relating to academic performance. For

example, not all lonely students are failing academically, but loneliness can still strongly

affect the intention to drop out of school (Frostad et al., 2015).

Consequently, the model resulting from our review is consistent with other research

indicating multiple trajectories to school dropout and an interaction of various factors in

the explanation of school dropout processes (Finn, 1989; Janosz et al., 2000; Rumberger

& Lim, 2008; Markussen et al., 2011). However, bringing together the various results

made us aware that these studies were almost exclusively based on correlational

designs. The studies either established a link between attachment and a potential

mediator, or they established a link between a potential mediator and academic performance or school dropout, thus fulfilling a prerequisite for mediation. On the basis of this prerequisite, there was a tendency in the literature to anticipate and suggest mediation without testing explicitly for *statistically significant mediation effects.* Only two studies were found to test such effects. The first study showed children's test behavior to be a significant mediator between ambivalent attachment and cognitive skills (O`Connor & McCartney, 2007). In the insecure/other group all four mechanisms hypothesized by Ijzendoorn and his colleagues (1995) showed statistically significant mediation effects on cognitive skills. The second study found maternal tutoring quality, relationship with peers, cooperation in school, and delay of gratification to be statistically significant mediators contributing to explain the association between secure attachment in preschool and school performance in middle school (West et al.,2013).

Summing up the results on mechanisms mediating between attachment quality and academic performance, it became evident that results on statistically significant mediation effects are quite limited. Nevertheless, the two studies testing for mediation effects (O`Connor & McCartney, 2007; West et al., 2013) did demonstrate some promise related to the confirmation of the four original mediation hypotheses (Ijzendoorn et al., 1995). Our review, however, suggests that further research is necessary in order to establish any causation. Of particular relevance in future studies are longitudinal designs covering the entire developmental period. These studies need not only to include measures like the Strange Situation Procedure (SSP) for standardization of early attachment measurement, but also measures of school dropout, while controlling for factors like IQ, prior school achievement, and SES. That said, one longitudinal study has suggested an interesting alternative to focusing on attachment quality alone. Measuring

the contributions of early relationships in the school dropout process, Sroufe and his colleagues (2005) also included other factors of caregiving. First, they found that the attachment measures (SSP, AAI) were robustly related to academic performance and consistently predicted school dropout. However, when the attachment measures were combined with other quality-of-care measures like maternal sensitivity and quality of problem-solving support, the combination of these measures turned out to be a far stronger predictor of school dropout than attachment alone (Jimerson et al., 2000). It is interesting that the measures added to the early care variable seem closely related to the mediation mechanisms of the attachment-exploration hypothesis and the attachment-teaching hypothesis suggested by Ijzendoorn and his colleagues (1995). This composite variable of early care predicted school dropout with 77% accuracy at the age of three (Sroufe et al., 2005). Consequently, combining measures of early care quality increased the predictive accuracy related to school dropout considerably even after controlling for IQ, academic performance and SES. Hence, the only study covering the entire developmental process leading up to school dropout suggests that early care quality plays an important role in the school dropout process. Furthermore, this study indicates that early care quality contributes substantially to explaining why some children "arrive in school predisposed to nonparticipation and nonidentification" (Finn, 1989, p. 130). Accordingly, Jimerson and his colleagues (2000) suggested that more established predictors like low academic performance, peer rejection, and behavior problems can be understood as markers of a school dropout process rooted in earlier development.

Nevertheless, the complex picture of school dropout processes emerging from research (Rumberger & Lim, 2008) has not offered an agreed-upon model explaining the entire

dropout process including the role of early attachment and its mediating mechanisms.

However, one developmental model seems to explain the results of the reviewed

literature rather well. Jimerson and his colleagues (2000) were guided by a

developmental transactional model (Sameroff, 1992; Sroufe, Egeland, & Carlson, 1999)

when making sense of this complexity. In their model, early experiences have some

priority in the sense that early developmental history frames later interactions with the

environment. The child will continue to interpret new experiences within this

established framework. Thus, developmental history like early care quality, for example,

may set other events into motion creating a cascading effect. Through such a

mechanism, early care quality, including child-caregiver attachment, may contribute to

many developmental processes, among them the school dropout processes. Such

developmental cascading can set the child on a positive or negative trajectory by

promoting or disturbing development in various other domains, levels or systems

essential to learning, performance and mastery (Masten & Cicchetti, 2010; Masten et al.,

2005).

In accordance with these conceptions, some of the studies we reviewed, although they

did not establish causation, still indicated that the early development of trusting

relationships may constitute a positive environment for learning and for future

development of generalized positive expectations of the sense of self with others. Furrer

and Skinner (2003) called such positive expectations for high relatedness. Subsequently,

high relatedness seems to become a marker of children with a readiness to socialize and

of "children involved in a positive motivational dynamic" (Furrer & Skinner, 2003, p.

158; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). According to the reviewed literature, it is this complex

interaction of socio-emotional processes with academic performance that seems to offer

the most comprehensive understanding of school dropout processes. However, we need to have a better understanding of these complex interactions. Studying the *potential mechanisms* by which early relationship experiences may influence future school dropout processes seems to be one promising pathway.

4.3. How studies 1 and 2 and became a basis for study 3

The purpose of our review was to investigate present knowledge about the role of parent-child attachment in the school dropout process. The review concluded that secure attachment seemed to be associated with high-relatedness and a positive motivational dynamic, and that this dynamic constituted a positive environment for learning (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). However, motivational experiences had also been at the center of the participants attention in study 1, making "Amotivation" emerge as one of six main themes. Consequently, our interviews had made us curious as to *what students who had dropped out of school and were off-track, perceived as the essential motivating and demotivating factors in these processes when asked explicitly about their motivation.* The review made us curious as *to whether young people who had dropped out of school themselves experienced the quality of relationships as factors influencing their engagement in school and their intention to drop out of or stay in school.*

Finally, participants in study 1 had described problems with social interaction leading to long-term conflicts, shrinking social networks, social withdrawal, drug addiction and feelings of social awkwardness. These descriptions also made us curious about the mental health of young people who had dropped out and were off-track, making us interested in investigating how they perceived the influence of mental health in their

dropout processes. The inclusion criterion for participants in study 1 being that they were still striving to get back on track 2-5 years after the dropout event, suggested that these participants struggled with some kind of maladjustment. Although there are studies supporting an association between mental health disorders and school dropout (Breslau, 2010; Esch et al., 2014), the amount of school dropout due to mental health problems has been found to vary substantially (Breslau et al., 2008; Kessler et al., 1995; Van der Stoep et al., 2003). Nevertheless, Markussen and Seland, (2012) found that 20.8% of their dropout students from the county of Akershus explained dropout by mental health problems or psychosocial problems. Together, these results triggered the subsequent research question concerning *the participants` experiences with the role of psychopathology in school dropout and graduation processes*.

4.4. Study 3: Long-term dropout from school and work and mental health in young adults in Norway: A qualitative interview-based study

Research on school dropout is comprehensive. The knowledge is more limited when it comes to how early school leavers experience that school dropout processes come to influence their transitions into adult employment. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to elaborate on the more open questions from the interviews in study 1, where we had asked the participants to describe their experiences with high school dropout in general. In study 3 we asked questions more specifically about the participants` perception of motivating and demotivating factors in the processes of coping with school and employment. We wanted to focus on their own beliefs about which factors had stimulated their intention to drop out of school or stimulated their intention to stay in school.

When comparing descriptions from college students and students who had dropped out and were off track, two particular differences emerged. *First, the off-track students reported more demotivation due to mental health problems than the college students.* Four of those who had dropped out described long-term experiences with symptoms of anxiety, depression and eating disorders. None of the college students described these long-term trajectories. The college students on the other hand, reported mental health problems appearing during middle school or high school. They described how they coped with their problems by accessing the appropriate social support. In addition, their symptoms were often described as less severe. While the college students mostly described sadness, loneliness, lack of motivation, confusion, frustration, or feeling out of their comfort zone, the students who had dropped out and were off track, described symptoms of depression, panic attacks, dramatic weight loss, and phobic anxiety. Four of those who had dropped out of school had also received diagnoses like personality disorders, depression and eating disorders during high school, while two college students had been diagnosed with depression. When comparing present mental health in the two groups, measured by the clinical interviews, the descriptions from the qualitative interviews seemed to be confirmed. The diagnostic interviews confirmed more numerous symptoms and more serious symptoms of mental health disorders among those who had dropped out than among the college students. Furthermore, their long-term trajectories of mental health problems had continued after their school dropout. None of them were currently employed in regular jobs or re-enrolled in regular high school programs. Concerning the two participants who developed mental health symptoms in the aftermath of early school-leaving, they had at the time of the interview struggled with mental health problems for several years. At present they had problems

finding employment, and felt a certain despair due to the fact that their transition into adult life was made difficult by the lack of formal education. Thus, there were no immediate signs of the kind of recovery and resilient bouncing back described by the group of college students. In the college group, mental health problems seemed to have culminated during high school and at the time of the interview; experiences of pride from graduating high school and coping with college were at their focus of attention.

Secondly, unlike the students who had dropped out and were off track, the college students described their access to social support as the main factor strengthening their intention to stay in school. They reported social support from parents, from involved and enthusiastic teachers, from school engaged peer-groups, active school nurses and supportive therapists, former athletic coaches giving them the-stay-in-school-talk, extended family helping with homework, or people their parents knew who taught math or summer school, and so on. Although those who dropped out of school did report some support, it failed to increase their school engagement or positively affect their intention to stay in school. Thus, there seemed to be a disproportionate relationship between the amount of problems described and accessible support. The more severe and long-term symptoms of mental health problems described by those off track, were reported to elicit only limited social support compared to the comprehensive support elicited by the more short-term and moderate symptoms described by the college students. The support systems described by the two groups seemed to differ. When the early school leavers were asked what had helped them when they were struggling at school, several of them answered: "my mother". They could not think of anyone or anything else when asked about this in particular. Most of them said that no one at school had tried to prevent them from dropping out. One said his learning difficulties

had never been addressed, several said teachers had advised them to quit due to their excessive absence.

Nevertheless, the students who had dropped out of school did not explicitly say that they perceived a lack of support, for example at school. They just described the lack of it without expressing disappointment or frustration, indicating that they had housed no such expectations in the first place. The off-track students did not seem to know where to turn for assistance. Although their mothers were perceived as supportive, the problems needing to be addressed, like eating disorders, bullying and attention problems, seemed to be overtaxing the resources available to their caregivers. Consequently, the students who had dropped out often ended up fending for themselves, and their problems endured.

Summing up, although most of the participants who had experienced mental health problems tended to dwell on these problems in their descriptions of demotivating factors, mental health was not the only factor described as affecting their intention to drop out or to stay in school. Some included problems with learning or attention and academic performance, others included stressful life events. Thus, the mental health problems described were not explicitly named as the main *causal factor* in school dropout processes, nor was coping with mental health problems named as the most important causal factor in graduation processes. Nevertheless, most of those who had dropped out of school did describe that when various stressors accumulated, and mental health problems were triggered without sufficient social support being accessible, these situations had seriously weakened their motivation to stay in school or to become or stay employed. The college students, on the other hand, described how support from

various sources contributed substantially to their coping with their problems and thus strengthened their intention to stay in school.

That said, one can of course question the transferability of results from qualitative data in small samples like the ones in our study. Moreover, research on the role of mental health in school dropout processes does not provide estimates to help us evaluate how typical our results are. Studies estimating the proportion of students leaving high school early due to mental disorders are scarce, and estimates vary from 14% to 46% (Breslau et al., 2008; Kessler et al., 1995; Markussen & Seland, 2012; Van der Stoep et al., 2003). Nevertheless, stable trajectories of mental health problems from childhood to young adulthood seem to add to the likelihood of the individual being neither in employment, education (NEET) nor training at the end of adolescence (Veldman, Reijneveld, Ortiz, Verhulst, & Bültmann, 2015). Long-term effects of mental disorders may indeed reduce the odds of graduating high school (Mojtabai et al., 2015), and those with an early onset of anxiety and depression are an at-risk population for later educational underachievement and unemployment (Fergusson & Horwood, 2001). Thus, there are some indications that long-term trajectories of continued mental health problems, like the ones described by four of the students in study 3 who had dropped out of school, may actually increase the risk of school dropout and negative employment outcomes.

It is important to keep in mind that our study focused on a subcategory of those who had dropped out of school by including only those registered at the NLWA. They were struggling to get back on track 2-5 years after the dropout event. Consequently, when most of them described problems with mental health as an important factor in their dropout processes from school or employment, this may suggest the possibility of an

overrepresentation of mental health problems *in the group of students who had dropped out and were still off track. This hypothesis of course needs to be studied further.*

Studies on the influence of poor health on school dropout have provided mixed results. In his review of studies testing for such causal effects, Breslau (2010) concluded that psychopathology was the health factor most likely to have an effect on school dropout. In accordance with this conclusion, student groups with emotional/ behavioural disabilities have by far the lowest percentage of high school graduates when compared to other disability groups like mental retardation and multiple handicaps (van der Stoep et al., 2003). Accordingly, youth from the National Longitudinal Transition Study of Special Education with serious emotional disturbances were found to have twice the dropout rate of students in the general population, and the highest dropout rate of all students with disabilities in the US (Wagner, 1995). Furthermore, they have more adverse employment outcomes than other disability groups (Wagner, 1995). However, children and adolescents may have more than one mental disorder, and these disorders may influence educational processes differently. Thus, the comorbidity of disorders is a challenge to the dropout research. There is some evidence that the *number* of disorders present matters, and that the risk of dropout increases with the number of disorders (Kessler et al., 1995; Borges et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2009). In line with these results, five out of seven students from study 3 who had dropped out, were diagnosed with two or more disorders in young adulthood (M.I.N.I.), while none in the graduate group were diagnosed with more than one. When including diagnoses they had received during middle and high school years, six out of seven of those who had dropped out had in sum been diagnosed with three or more disorders while one graduate had been diagnosed with more than one disorder.

In addition to the number of disorders necessary to trigger school dropout, Breslau (2010) focused the *type* of disorder. According to him, there is accumulating evidence that some disorders are more influential than others. He concluded that externalizing disorders like conduct disorders and ADHD were among the prominent causal factors explaining the association between mental disorders in general and academic performance. Looking at these conclusions, it was a bit puzzling that among the many diagnoses found in our small sample of early school leavers, not a single one of them was an externalizing disorder. Although we did not test for ADHD and conduct disorder, we interviewed the participants about relationships with peers and teachers, asking about conflicts, attention problems, impulsivity and aggression in particular. In addition, the M.I.N.I does test for antisocial personality disorder. Thus, we systematically asked about externalizing behavior, and concluded that, with one exception, they described withdrawal and passivity more than active opposition and behavior problems. Unfortunately, the proportion of students in the overall population leaving school specifically due to internalizing disorders is not known, and therefore there is no way of telling how typical our sample is in this respect. Nonetheless, the relatively high prevalence of internalizing disorders like anxiety and depression in the general population and their substantial comorbidity with other mental disorders have justified an investigation of their role as a potential risk factor in school dropout processes (Kessler et al., 2016).

Melkevik and his colleagues (2016b) reviewed the literature on internalizing disorders. They found a significant association between internalizing disorders or symptoms thereof and early school-leaving. Their review suggests that students with an early onset

of internalizing disorders are to some extent "selected" into school dropout processes. The researchers do, however, caution against the drawing of absolute conclusions due to the lack of meta-analytic evidence and to the limited possibilities of assessing causality in most studies. Of particular interest in this review, however, are the studies where the association between internalizing disorders and school dropout attenuated, and became insignificant when adjusting for externalizing disorders (Breslau, et al., 2011; Fergusson & Woodward, 2002). Reflecting on these results, Melkevik and his colleagues (2016b) remarked that specific disorders like mania, panic disorder, specific phobia and post-traumatic stress disorder retained odd ratios that indicated that they would become statistically significant in larger samples. In line with this remark, several epidemiological studies in adults have found that social phobia tends to begin in adolescence, have a chronic course, and be associated with poor school performance, school dropout, poor work performance and unemployment (Esch et al., 2014; Schreiner, Johnson, Hornig, Liebowitz, & Weissman, 1992; Stein & Kean, 2000; Wittchen, Essau, von Zerssen, Krieg, & Zaudig, 1992). The complex relationship between internalizing disorders and school dropout also emerged in a nationally representative sample of American adults where school disengagement turned out to be significantly associated with two specific mood disorders; major depression and bipolar disorder, and only one anxiety disorder, namely social phobia (Vaughn et al., 2011). Interestingly, four of the participants from study 3 who had dropped out had been diagnosed with panic disorder, social phobia or major depression.

Thus, what the quantitative studies referenced above seem to suggest is that the association between internalizing disorders and school dropout may be too complex to be explained within the framework of the internalizing versus externalizing dichotomy.

Some particular anxiety disorders may be associated with school dropout while others may not. Moreover, moderating factors may be involved as was demonstrated in one of the few meta-analyses. Riglin, Petrides, Fredrickson, and Rice (2014) found complex interactions between types of internalizing disorders, school dropout and other factors. While lower school grades were associated with higher scores on depression, the association between low grades and anxiety emerged only when other factors were included, for example age. Thus, school achievement seemed to be more strongly influenced by anxiety in late adolescence than in early adolescence. Others found effect modifications by sex (Esch et al., 2014), some suggesting that internalizing disorders may have more negative effects on school attainment in females than in males (Fletcher, 2008). The mere complexities of these associations seem to mirror the intricate descriptions given by the students in study 3 concerning the various influences of anxiety. Moderate achievement anxiety was described as keeping some of the female graduates working hard and completing school, while some early leavers with phobic anxieties described panic related to mere attendance causing absenteeism, low grades and depression. Some college students described how they were pushed by their fear of failure to re-enrol in school after failing their final exam, thus eventually succeeding to graduate. Off-track students, however, described how they were overwhelmed and demotivated by their anxiety and how these experiences negatively affected their school engagement. Van Ameringen, Mancini, and Farvolden, (2003) found that patients with anxiety who left school early suffered a higher risk of a life time diagnosis of social phobia and a number of other diagnoses. Consequently, there is a risk that factors like panic disorders, social phobia, and depression in combination with low educational attainment can influence the motivational dynamics of young people, complicating their struggle to get back on track.

Summing up the discussion on the role of internalizing disorders in school dropout in general, it is fair to say that some research so far may not support internalizing disorders as causal factors in school dropout (Melkevik et al., 2016b). There is still a possibility that some of these disorders, like social phobia and depression, may play a more prominent role in the school disengagement processes of those eventually dropping out of school. Thus, these particular disorders may negatively influence the passage of the students who dropped out as they transition into young adulthood by contributing to adverse employment outcomes. However, mental disorders like depression and anxiety may also develop as a consequence of school dropout (Esch et al., 2014). Accordingly, two of the participants who had dropped out were diagnosed with anxiety and depression *in the aftermath* of school dropout. Furthermore, the consequences of earlier and later experiences are often cumulative or may become apparent only in the context of other risk factors (Sroufe, et al., 2010). Thus, struggling with school may have taken its toll on these participants, although the symptoms appeared later while coping with the new challenges of their laborious transition into employment. Presently, they both experienced how dropping out made it difficult for them to succeed in working life. One of them described how he could not access the jobs he really wanted due to his lack of a high school diploma, and the other described how he could not compete for promotions and was vulnerable to downsizing. For both of them, repeated experiences of failure to cope with challenges of employment seemed to contribute to their gradual development of anxiety and depression. These mental health problems had made finding and keeping employment increasingly difficult. In line with their descriptions, a sense of mastery has emerged as a strong mediator between low educational attainment and mental health problems (Dalgard, Mykletun, Rognerud,

Johansen, & Zahl, 2007). To accomplish a sense of mastery, children and adolescents

need a basis of competence. Masten and Curtis (2000) argue that there are strong

empirical connections between competence and psychopathology, in the sense that

competence difficulties often co-occur with psychopathology. Thus, children with

particular mental health disorders have predictable competence problems, and children

who are unable to live up to school expectations on competence have elevated rates of

mental disorders (Masten & Coatsworth, 1995, 1998). Examples of both types of

influences were described by the participants in study 3.

Nevertheless, more that 10% of those completing high school in 2011/2012 in Norway

were above 25 years of age (OECD, 2014). Accordingly, several of our participants may

re-enrol and graduate later. In that case, dropout may constitute little more than a delay

of graduation. However, for those who do not graduate high school, the level of achieved

competence still matters. The higher the level of achieved competence in high school,

the more likely students were to be employed at 25 (Markussen, 2016a). Furthermore,

among the students that completed their last year of high school but had failed some

exams, more students came back to graduate than among the students who left school

early. Moreover, even temporary delays in school completion may have negative effects

on mental health. In a Norwegian study, every additional year of delayed high school

completion was associated with increased symptoms of anxiety and depression, and

thus could constitute a risk factor for lacking re-enrolment in school and employment

(Melkevik et al., 2016a). Melkevik and colleagues (2016a) also found that the

combination of delayed completion of high school and lower educational attainment was

associated with high levels of anxiety. Consequently, by leaving school early our off-

track participants may be at a disadvantage in young adulthood, whether they are

temporarily or permanently dropping out of school, and whether their mental health problems developed before or after the dropout event. When interpreting our early leavers` descriptions of mental health problems in the light of research literature, their development of disorders like panic anxiety, social phobia and depression may be perceived as markers of dropout processes and a risk of adverse employment outcomes. Their descriptions of mental health problems may indicate that these disorders are moderators that when present, strengthen the link between childhood adversity and dropout from school and employment. These descriptions are important because the inconsistent results on the effect of internalizing disorders in dropout processes (Melkevik et al., 2016b) may cause us to ignore their contribution.

The second motivational factor focused on in the interviews was the *availability of social support*. According to Thompson & Goodvin, (2016 p. 89), social support consists of "emotional affirmation received from close relational partners, particularly in periods of distress and turmoil". They argue that although such affirmation is considered central by most researchers, social support is a more multifaceted phenomenon including also the provision of "material and interpersonal resources that are of value to the recipient" (Thomson, 1995, p. 43). In line with this definition, those in study 3 who had dropped out described lack of social support as demotivating factors in their school dropout process. Most of them were unable to come up with anyone beside their mothers, who got involved when they needed help to cope with and stay in school. Unlike the students who had dropped out and were off track, the college students had experienced support from both parents and teachers. Most of them had experienced support from peers. Social support was described as sustained, and was perceived as essential in helping them solve their problems with school. They described accessing both academic and

emotional support. Academic support can be defined as "the belief that significant others value and encourage student learning and progress by modelling, helping and providing guidance and information when necessary" (Song et al., 2015, p. 823). The graduate students described how they had accessed various types of academic support. They all talked about parental expectations on educational attainment influencing them to develop educational goals. Some also described how parental expectations made them afraid of not living up to these standards. Several experienced helpful parental monitoring of school work or guidance in important educational decision processes, or described parents recruiting extra-familial support when problems with school became particularly challenging. In contrast to the graduates, the participants who had dropped out never spontaneously talked of parental expectations of academic attainment. Several described an absence of parental monitoring of their homework due to a lack of relevant parental competence, mainly in math. When asked in particular about learning problems, none of them reported that their parents recruited relatives, friends or other network contacts to help with academic challenges. The effect of *particular types of support* is not well understood, but there are indications that parental academic support in the form of parental expectations of school achievement, helping with homework and supplying guidance and information, predicts stronger mastery goals (Song et al., 2015; Wentzel, 1998). The participants in study 3 who had dropped out of school, did not describe accessing the kind of academic support that might positively have influenced their academic motivation and their mastery goals. That said, this type of support may be a double-edged sword because it has also been found to predict higher test anxiety and a wish to outperform others, or avoid being outperformed by others by not trying, in addition to predicting increased test anxiety (Song et al., 2015). The latter results are very much in agreement with the descriptions given on academic support by two of the

college students who rebelled against parental expectations through increasing truancy and avoiding to perform during a period in high school.

Emotional support, on the other hand, is defined as "the belief that significant others respect students as individuals and attend to their feelings and needs, by expressing empathy and concern about their personal well-being" (Song, et al., 2015, p. 23). The participants from study 3 who had dropped out described accessing almost exclusively this type of support. When facing challenges related to school, emotional support was almost always provided by their mothers. Their mothers seemed to worry about their well-being, and expressed sympathy. Nevertheless, the participants` descriptions indicated that the emotional support from their mothers alone had not enabled them to cope with comprehensive challenges like learning difficulties, phobic anxieties or being bullied or lonely. One explanation may be that the number of sources providing emotional support may also be of importance. Unlike the college students, many of those who had dropped out had lost contact with their fathers in association with the parental divorce. These long-time separations were described as having substantially reduced the availability of emotional support. Such loss of parental contact has been associated with an increase in health complaints in the form of depression, anxiety, and psychosomatic symptoms (Reiter, Hjörleifsson, Breidablikk, & Meland, 2013). Experiencing perceived emotional support from parents, on the other hand, seems to predict stronger mastery goals, lower test anxiety and higher academic achievement than any other type of support (Song et al., 2015). Consequently, the reduced emotional support due to absent fathers described by some of those who had dropped out, seems to constitute a risk factor associated with mental health problems.

In the research literature, social support is often measured in general without differentiating various types of support. More studies have focused on the influence of support from various *sources,* mainly parents, teachers and peers (Thompson & Goodvin, 2016). In study 3, most of the students who had dropped out did report accessing parental support in crises. However, they did not describe accessing such support more on a regular everyday basis. They mostly seemed to cope by themselves, and described limited parental involvement in their *daily* struggles with school challenges. Their descriptions of everyday life seemed to suggest a parental preoccupation with challenging life situations like for example the aftermath of divorce. Thus, when trying to understand the implications of these descriptions, we explored research on the influence of perceived parental support on educational trajectories. Results on the effect of parental support on school engagement seemed relevant, as engagement is by many considered the primary model for understanding and predicting school completion and school dropout (Archambault, et al., 2009; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, & Pagani, 2008). Interestingly, parental support seems to be associated with several indicators of school engagement (Estell & Perdue, 2013; Wang & Eccles, 2012) and higher levels of sense of mastery (Surjadi, Lorenz, Wickrama, & Conger, 2011). Furthermore, family social support has been found to relate to mental health and educational achievement in adolescence even when adjusting for social class (Rothon, Goodwin, & Stansfield, 2012). Rothon et al. (2012) concluded that the influence of parental support cannot be explained solely by SES. A lack of paternal support in particular was for example found to reduce the odds of reaching the General Certificate of Education benchmark. In addition, perceived parental support was found to be a salient factor in the students` general adjustment in early adolescence (Demaray, Malecki, Davidson, Hodgson, & Rebus, 2005). Thus, research suggested a unique impact

of perceived parental support on school engagement and achievement. This influence of perceived support on school motivation seemed to continue as the child grew older. Although there was a gradual shift in social priorities towards peers, perceived support from parents seems to work as a buffer against the general reductions in school engagement often seen during early adolescence (Wang & Eccles, 2012).

Concerning extra-familial support from adults, however, the students in study 3, who had dropped out of school, generally described school interventions as rare, random, and inefficient. The interventions seemed to be directed at learning problems, but often came late in problem development, were mostly perceived of as unhelpful, and were not followed up when they failed. One intervention in math, for example, was described as helpful, but was removed after some time, causing the student to fall behind again. It is of course possible that support had been offered during the dropout process without the participant perceiving this as supportive. According to Thompson and Goodvin (2016), it is the *perceived* support that is related to the psychological well-being and the stress-buffering consequences. However, the students who had dropped out of school and also had experienced bullying and marginalization could not describe any kind of intervention initiated by school employees or others outside the home. Whether their problems were mainly academic or socio-emotional or both, most off-track students described their experiences of being left alone until their absence rate made teachers advise them to quit, or they just stopped coming all together. These experiences seemed to resemble the feelings of being invisible reported in the dropout interviews conducted by Natland and Rasmussen (2012). However, it is difficult to know whether students, both in their study and ours, had experienced interventions intended to be supportive. What seems clear is that they had not perceived whatever was offered as supportive.

This absence of extra-familial support is somewhat unexpected, because adolescence is the period when non-parental adults gain new importance, and adolescents seek support and supervision from adults outside the home (Murray, 2009). Thus, supportive teachers are found to be of particular importance in minimizing the decline in school compliance, reduced sense of school identification and subjective devaluing of learning so typical of secondary school years (Wong & Eccles, 2012). Furthermore, teacher-student relationships seem to be especially important for children academically at risk, in particular those with low SES and learning difficulties (Roorda et al., 2011). Teachers` influence on students at risk may be partly related to the essential role they play in the academic and social motivational dynamic of students (Wentzel, Battle, Russel, & Looney, 2010). One study found that perceptions of teachers as supportive changed students` engagement in school through positively influencing their self-beliefs on competence and autonomy (Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008). Perceived teacher support seemed particularly related to outcomes closely associated with classroom functioning like interest in class, and compliance with classroom rules and norms (Wentzel, 1998), school engagement and academic performance (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Elias & Hayes, 2008; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Roorda et al., 2011). When asked to describe how positive teacher-child relationships in upper secondary school were developed and promoted, Norwegian students focused on mutual responsibility for the relationship, respect, the devastating effect of negative experiences in TSR, the need to bond and solve problems through conversations with teachers, teachers adapting education to the students` individual academic and emotional needs and teacher kindness (Krane et al., 2016). These were the characteristics of TSR that students experienced as essential to mental health and school dropout. However, positive descriptions of TSR was almost totally absent in the narratives of off-track

students in study 3 (and in study 1). Participants with dropout experiences who were off track, reported neither teacher initiatives aimed at establishing positive TSR, nor experiences of mutual effort and respect, nor individual adaption of education to individual needs or bonding conversations that helped them solve problems.

The results discussed above also seem to be in line with the descriptions of teacher support given by the college students in study 3. They spontaneously talked about supportive teachers when asked about who came to their rescue or what was helpful when problems piled up and motivation for school decreased. The college students described how bonding conversations and emotional support from teachers helped them endure periods of demotivation and confusion, preserve or re-establish their mastery goals, protect their self-esteem and their intention to stay in school. One of the graduates said explicitly that his positive bonding with the teachers together with his enjoyment of learning made it possible to endure his lack of peer acceptance. Another described how one of her teachers kept granting her privileges she had not really earned (participating in excursions, etc.), and that this teacher's individual adaption of education helped reignite motivation for school in a period of disengagement. In general, the graduate students talked about how persistent academic support in the form of particular teachers` expectations for them, their encouragement, adaptive problem solving and enthusiastic, high-quality teaching inspired engagement behavior like attendance, participation in class and homework completion.

Generally, the associations between perceived and received support is modest, indicating that not all interventions or reactions intended to be supportive, result in perceived support (Thompson &Goodvin, 2016). Thus, it is possible that the students

who had dropped out had received more assistance intended to be supportive, than what was reported in the interviews. They did for example describe that some teachers had sometimes confronted them with their absenteeism, given them extra homework or reprimanded them for bad behavior. These interventions may have been intended to be supportive, but were *perceived* as punitive or dismissive by these participants. They communicated an absence of mutual responsibility for developing positive TSR, resulting in a lack of bonding conversations and individual adaption of education. Interestingly, perceived support also appears as a much focused subject in a recent book on school dropout in Norway. After presenting studies on how students themselves perceived and justified their own choices in planning their future, Reegård and Rogstad (2016b) concluded by calling for an increased focus on factors promoting well-being, belongingness and motivation when discussing school dropout. They pointed out that motivation to learn must also be learned, and that this can only take place through social interaction in learning environments promoting self-esteem and self-efficacy, and providing recognition. Thus, when the students in study 3 who had dropped out and were off track, reported that they were seldom included in such interactions, they seem to offer a relevant explanation for leaving school early.

Furthermore, as the participants described their perception of motivating and demotivating factors influencing school engagement, the importance of peers became clear. Although experiences with peers in the two groups of participants seemed to differ. Five college students described substantial peer support motivating them to attend school and perform school tasks, even when their grades were relatively low and academic motivation was decreasing. They explained this by saying that school completion was valued in their peer group. Among those who dropped out, none

described long periods of harmonious peer relationships at school. Either they described being bullied or marginalized as experiences they had never fully recovered from, or they described problems with connecting to and agreeing with peers at school. They all described the demotivating and anxiety-provoking experiences of never finding belongingness or a way to comfortably participate in classroom activities. These descriptions seem to agree with results from quantitative studies showing how the presence of perceived peer support worked like a buffer against maladaptive motivation, predicting lower test anxiety (Song et al., 2015) and positively predicting the adoption of prosocial goals (Wentzel, 1998). Wentzel (1992) argues that the pursuit of such goals partly explains the association between peer acceptance and academic achievement. Peer support seems to be associated with positive feelings towards school, and is presumed to positively influence the willingness to do the work (Estell & Perdue, 2013; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Several college students in study 3 talked about how they came to school primarily to meet their friends. They seemed to experience that their lives as adolescents took place primarily when being with their friends at school. Although the school tasks were not necessarily their primary focus, they described the establishment of a common norm saying they should do what was asked of them at school, or adopting what Wentzel (1998) called 'prosocial goals'. This description of adopting prosocial goals may shed some light on why peer support has also been related to students` actual engagement behavior (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Nevertheless, research on the role of peer support in *educational outcomes* is scarce. Estell & Perdue (2013) could find only eight studies of this relationship, indicating that the effect of peer support is an understudied contextual influence. Results so far show inconsistent patterns of associations with school engagement (Goodenow, 1993; Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994; Furrer & Skinner, 2003). This may partly be due to the fact that a

potential positive influence of peer support will depend on students connecting with a prosocial peer group. This prerequisite was demonstrated in our data when one of those who had dropped out of school described how he finally found social acceptance in a peer group with no school engagement. To sustain peer support, he said, he gave up on his crumbling school engagement all together.

Research on school motivation, however, often seems to be inspired by the framework of expectancy-value theory (Weiner, 1990). This framework hypothesizes that achievement motivation is a function of the child`s expectancies of academic success combined with the value this success has for the child (Weiner, 1990). Goodenow (1993) argues that what is missing in this framework is the explanation of the *sources* of these expectations of success and commitments to academic values. She calls for a more careful exploration of the social contexts in which these academic motivational dynamics unfold, to better understand how these contexts may shape and influence academic motivation. Reviewing research literature, Baumeister and Leary (1995) found evidence indicating that the need to belong is a fundamental and extremely pervasive source of motivation. Accordingly, the link between feelings of relatedness and academic performance was found to be mediated by child motivation, particularly in the form of classroom engagement (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007). Children reporting a higher sense of relatedness were found to be more emotionally and behaviourally engaged in school (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Each and every social partner seemed to count, and losing a social partner was related to reductions in emotional and behavioural academic engagement. Using a nationally representative sample, Fall and Roberts (2012) tested the self-system model of motivational development as a framework for explaining school dropout. They found

that children`s perception of parent and teacher support predicted students` self-perception, which in turn predicted their academic and behavioural engagement and their academic performance. The internal dynamics described above link relatedness, self-perceptions, motivational dynamics with school engagement and academic performance. This dynamic also seems to be in line with the mediating or moderating model of school dropout described by Janosz and his colleagues (1997), where present school experiences are influenced by prior and present family experiences.

Summing up the theme of social support, our results seem to be in line with other research indicating, as Bowlby had argued, that individuals of all ages are more content and able to use their talents positively when they experience that trusted others are "standing behind them" (Bowlby, 1973, p. 25). Although more research is needed on the influence of peer support on school outcomes, substantial research seems to indicate that parents, teachers and peers contribute independent supportive influences in young people's lives (Roorda et al., 2011; Song at al., 2015, Wang & Eccles, 2012). The supportive qualities of these interpersonal interactions are found to predict academic and social aspects of motivation (Wentzel, 1998; Wentzel et al., 2010) and academic achievement (Roorda et al., 2011; Song et al., 2015). Of particular interest to our study are results suggesting that social support predicts mental health, functioning like a buffer-mechanism for well-being (Dalgard, Bjørk, & Tambs, 1995; Hakulinen et al., 2016; Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009). Thompson and Goodvin (2016) also pointed to the social monitoring function of support systems and how these networks constitute a protective influence in children's lives by detecting signs of negative development like depressive symptoms or school problems. Preventing harm is essential to promoting well-being. Furthermore, because the effect of support from various sources seems to be additive

rather than compensatory (Wang & Eccles, 2012), the number of sources available may be essential in challenging situations. The sources available for support may differ in the various stages of life, and decrease or increase following changes in life. Accessing more than one source of support and having various supportive people monitoring their development was perceived by the college students in study 3 to make them more resilient in periods of their lives when their school engagement was severely challenged. They were still able to access several sources of support stimulating different kinds of school engagement. For most students who had dropped out and were off track, it all came down to the quality of one source of support, thus making them particularly vulnerable to the consequences of family change, learning difficulties, peer rejection or mental health problems.

4.5. Interconnecting our three studies

Our purpose was to explore how unemployed young people who had dropped out of school described and explained critical aspects of their school dropout processes, what motivational factors they experienced as essential in these processes and the role of mental health problems in these motivational processes. Participants in study 1 contributed answers by describing experiences of "Abandonment" but also reported "Amotivation" related to school. Participants in study 3, who had dropped out, described lack of social support and reported more severe mental health problems than the college students. The college students described life trajectories characterized by multiple sources of perceived support but also reported more school engagement, less mental health problems and more successful coping with various school-related problems. Thus, the college students seemed to describe their experiences with various sources of

perceived support as having a "stress-buffering function" (Thompson & Goodvin, 2016). Unlike the college students, the students who had dropped out and were off track in studies 1 and 3 gave almost no descriptions of such stress-buffering experiences. This absence of stress-buffering factors seemed to make them more vulnerable in their attempts to cope with the amotivation and mental health problems that negatively affected their intention to stay in school. The students who had dropped out and were off track, seemed to describe life trajectories where a lack of supportive adults and peers had negatively influenced their core motivational processes. Thus, they had not developed positive educational expectations or internalized the value of educational attainment, nor had they developed the necessary school engagement to stay in school. College students, on the other hand, experienced their supportive relationships with parents, teachers, peers and others as affecting their core motivation sufficiently to positively influence their school engagement, their ability to cope with problems, and stay in school. Consequently, results from the interview studies seem to be in line with the conclusion from the narrative review, emphasising the importance of socio-emotional factors in school dropout processes in general and in motivational processes in particular.

Before closing the discussion of this project on students who dropped out of school and were off track, it is important to contextualize the results and relate them to the general field of school dropout research described at the beginning. In the introduction we concluded that there is evidence that school dropout in general can be predicted by many factors ranging from academic performance and family factors to behavioural, social and personality factors (Rumberger, 2006). Some researchers have also pointed to the need for differentiating between subgroups of students who drop out of school,

thus suggesting the possibility that the various predictors described in the introduction may play different roles in the various groups (De Witte et al., 2013; Janosz et al., 1997, 2000). Consequently, the present project, although inspired by the results from prior research on general predictors of school dropout, has a somewhat different objective by focusing on the subjective experiences of one particular subgroup of students who have dropped out of school, namely those who are off track. This subgroup was relatively absent in prior research. Therefore, we aimed to learn something about these particularly vulnerable young adults, about how they understood their school dropout trajectories and described the motivational dynamics influencing them according to their own experiences. The results from our studies can of course not be transferred to all students dropping out of school nor to the subgroup who is off track. What the results can do is suggest that social support, mental health problems and the interaction between them should be included as factors of particular interest in future research on the motivational dynamics of this particular subgroup of students dropping out of school. However, one must still bear in mind the interactions with various other factors.

Rumberger seemed to take into consideration many of these "other factors" when suggesting that the solution to the dropout problem might involve "addressing widespread inequalities in the larger social and economic system" (Rumberger, 2011, p. 291). He argues that improving lower-class children`s access to supportive and resourceful networks has the potential of improving their elementary school grades and eventually their school completion rates. This conclusion has particular relevance to the discussion of our results because the influences focused by the students who had dropped out of school, were associated with SES. Accordingly, our results may imply that what the students who had dropped out described was essentially how they

experienced the consequences of being socioeconomically disadvantaged. Supporting this interpretation of our data, low SES children and adolescents had two to three times higher risk of developing mental health problems (Reiss, 2013). Furthermore, there is a more pronounced link between school dropout and negative outcomes in children with low SES (Lansford, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 2016). Thus, low SES is one likely explanation of the problems that those who had dropped out described in the interviews. However, low SES may not be the only explanation of these problems. For example, social support was beneficial across socio-economic contexts (Wight, Botticello, & Aneshensel, 2006). Nevertheless, social support was found to be most protective of mental health for those enduring the disadvantages of low socioeconomic status. Some studies even found that social support can moderate the relationships between poverty and academic performance (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). In that case, providing more sources of social support into the dropout processes described in our data, might have compensated for some of the consequences of low SES. In the present project however, none of the participants had been raised in severe poverty. Although we did not measure parental income, we did ask participants in both studies about parental education and occupation. Together with descriptions of their social environments during childhood and adolescence, this information provided an impression that the students who had dropped out of school described lower SES, relatively speaking, than the college students. Therefore, it is possible that raising at an early age the socio-economic status of the students who dropped out, might have positively influenced their coping with school challenges and mental health problems. However, such comprehensive social and economic changes are of course complicated and most likely would take many years to accomplish, even with political consensus to implement them. In this perspective, further exploration into the role of relatedness problems and mental health problems in

school engagement processes might be justified. The reports from the total of 17 students, from our two studies, who had dropped out and were off track, seem to suggest the importance of these factors in understanding the motivational dynamics of this particular group of early school leavers. Provided that our results will gain further support, supplying those at risk of dropping out with perceived support and efficient mental health care may in the short run turn out to be a more feasible way to reduce the number of dropout trajectories developing into off-track dropout situations.

In conclusion, our studies may seem to originate within an individual perspective on school dropout, focusing on the characteristics of students, their attitudes, values and behaviours (Rumberger, 2006), and thus ignoring the institutional perspective and how these attitudes and behaviours are shaped by institutional settings. However, what the students who had dropped out of school and were registered at the NLWA in Harstad municipality described, was experiences with destabilized family situations and learning environments lacking basic components like perceived support from teachers and peers and the mental health care system. These young adults seemed to search for a climate of belongingness, recognition and coping not sufficiently provided by their schools, their communities or their families.

5.0. Limitations

5.1. Study 1

In general, samples of qualitative studies are much smaller than samples used in quantitative studies (Mason, 2010). However, there is no absolute consensus as to what constitutes a sufficient sample in qualitative research (Mason, 2010). Saturation seems to be a "matter of degree" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p, 136), thus making the sampling process quite essential and challenging. Nevertheless, we did manage to interview 10 participants of a total group of 85 young people fulfilling our criteria at the NLWA in Harstad, which amounts to 8.5% of this off-track population between 18-25 years of age. Our purposeful sample was mainly chosen by our contact person at the NLWA who contacted clients between 18 and 25 years of age in their register who had dropped out of high school, to ask if they were willing to participate in the study. This recruitment procedure had to comply with the NLWA`s administrative regulations and general research ethics, and challenged our ability to use theoretical sampling (Creswell, 2013). Consequently, our contact person`s subjective opinion of what was the most productive sample to answer our research questions did to some degree dominate the sampling process. She had, however, worked with these young adults for quite some time, developing an overview of our sampling universe which was young people who had dropped out of school and were clients at Harstad NLWA. Furthermore, we kept discussing the sampling with her as we interviewed the various informants. Another challenge was that, in spite of our experienced and resourceful helper, the recruiting of participants who had dropped out and were off track turned out to be somewhat laborious and time-consuming. Sharing academic failures with strangers takes a lot of courage and effort, and understandably, one of those contacted did not give their

consent to participate. Some potential participants we were unable to get in touch with because they had moved or changed their telephone numbers. Of those giving their consent, many needed several appointments before they were ready to meet with us for an interview. Accordingly, expanding the sample with a few more informants might have been useful, although the main themes kept reappearing after 5-6 interviews. That said, the participants consenting to take part in the study may have been different from the two that did not consent. The self-selection bias may have given us a sample of more open, self-disclosing or coping informants than those in the general sampling universe (Robinson, 2014), although we did manage to include some informants describing themselves as shy and withdrawn.

Another limitation in qualitative research lies in the interpretation process. Although we did draw on procedures and concepts from Grounded Theory
(Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the interpretation process still implies that other researchers might have accessed different representations of these descriptions of dropout processes. Being a team and not only one single researcher, and reading interviews independently of each other may have strengthened the design, although it does not solve the problem of subjectivity in interpretations. Thus, the preconceptions described in the introduction section have most likely influenced the generation of hypotheses during the analysis. We were also already familiar with some of the dropout research literature before we analyzed the interviews in study 1, and although we had few distinct hypotheses of how these young people understood what had happened to them, we did expect their answers to be school-related. Therefore, we were somewhat surprised by the development of the core theme of "Abandonment". Nevertheless, with

work experience from psychotherapy, it is likely that I have developed a sensitivity for relationship problems.

Finally, a small non-representative sample does make transferring the results difficult. There is, for example, a possibility that those who had dropped out and were registered at the NLWA are different from those coping on their own, or are different from those dropping out of school in other areas. Thus, to secure credibility, we interpreted our data as describing the experiences of those who dropped out of school and registered at the NLWA in Harstad. We did, however, conclude that these findings may suggest some relevant directions for further exploration of this group of young people in general. Nonetheless, we interviewed altogether 17 participants in our two studies who had dropped of school. They constituted about 20% of the total group of the 85 young people who had dropped out of school, were off track and registered at the NLWA in Harstad.

5.2. Study 2

This study was a narrative review. Our goal was to learn more about the role played by parent-child relationships in school dropout processes by focusing on parent-child attachment studies. We tried to survey the state of knowledge concerning the relationship between parent-child attachment and school dropout. Since studies focusing on attachment and school dropout were scarce, we also included studies of academic performance, as this factor is by many researchers considered one of the strongest predictors of school dropout (Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 1997; Markussen et al., 2011). Repeated searches with a variety of search terms in Google Scholar, PsychInfo and Academic Search Premier revealed no prior reviews of any kind

surveying this particular knowledge-base. No one seemed to have integrated these studies to give an overview of the research on mediators linking parent-child attachment quality to academic performance. Thus, performing a narrative review on these studies seemed a good place to start bridging this knowledge gap.

Consequently, we have not made a systematic literature search in the strictest sense, using the most detailed and rigorous methodology. We have searched Google Scholar, Psych Info and Academic Search Premier, using search terms like "parent-child attachment", "school achievement", "school dropout", and "school completion" separately. We also made searches combining the parent-child attachment search term with one of the three remaining search terms as a way of limiting the number of relevant studies. Due to the very high number of studies returned from some of these searches, we decided to focus primarily on longitudinal studies including the Strange Situation Procedure (SSP) with more than 30 participants focusing on high or low-risk populations. We did, however, include some studies that had used less validated attachment measures to allow for studies investigating the development of attachment over developmental stages like middle childhood and adolescence. This procedure does of course not guarantee a representative sample of this research, nor can we be sure that all high-quality studies have been included, and that all studies suffering from methodological weaknesses have been excluded. Selection bias is one of the most important systematic biases to be considered in reviews (Cipriani & Geddes, 2003). Cipriani and Geddes (2003, p. 146) argue that narrative reviews usually do not describe the methods used to select the studies included and thus "are based mainly on the experience and subjectivity of the author". To accommodate these methodological challenges, we have tried to give at least a basic description of the methods used in our

narrative review. Furthermore, we addressed the quality issue by including quite a few systematic reviews because these had applied more objective methods in selecting studies. To further minimize subjectivity on our part in the selection process, we also studied handbooks on attachment, student engagement and motivation to ensure the inclusion of high quality studies and studies considered of particular relevance by experienced and distinguished researchers in their respective fields. Some other types of reviews were also included. This in order to integrate a wide variety of various researchers` interpretations of their results within relevant fields of knowledge. Finally, we discussed any inconsistent results that appeared, and informed on the scarcity of results in some areas. Nevertheless, studies with "negative" results are less likely to be published (Dwan, Gamble, Williamson, & Kirkham, 2013; Sterling, 1959). Such publishing practices imply a publication bias and can prejudice the conclusions drawn from narrative reviews. However, some forms of research seems less vulnerable to bias, for example well-powered and well-designed studies, based on collaboration between various research centres and receiving public funding, are more likely to be published regardless of the results. Therefore, whenever our searches turned up such studies, we aimed to include them in our review. Nevertheless, a broad discussion of methodical issues and inconsistent results, although desirable, was not manageable within the scope of this article. We did, however, include systematic reviews from various fields of research and this type of review has been found to improve reliability and accuracy of the conclusion (Cipriani & Geddes, 2003). That said, the strength of the systematic review may turn out to be less helpful when reviewing particular topics. According to Collins and Fauser (2005) the problem is that the narrow focus and the strict methodical criteria of systematic reviews do not allow for comprehensive coverage. In our review the search for mediation mechanisms made a wide scope essential to us, enabling us to

interconnect various fields of research using a variety of methods. Thus, as a first attempt to get an overview of the field, choosing a narrative review and thus a less detailed and rigorous methodology than in a systemic review, seemed an acceptable trade-off for broader coverage.

5.3. Study 3

In this study we included college students as well as students who had dropped out of school and were off track. This time we did not focus on general stories about dropout processes; we wanted to understand more about their experiences with motivating and demotivating factors in particular. The individuals constituting a purposeful sample of early school leavers between 18 and 25 years of age were contacted by the contact person at the NLWA and then gave their consent to be contacted by the researchers. This recruitment procedure was in line with the administrative regulations of the NLWA and regulations from the local ethics committee that approved the study. Although all except two of those contacted by the NLWA gave their consent to be contacted by the researchers, there might be a selection bias, and we do not know whether the final group did constitute a representative sample of early school leavers registered at the Harstad NLWA office. The researchers had only limited influence on the list of potential participants made by our contact at the NLWA. She searched through the Harstad NLWA client lists looking for male and female participants between 18 and 25 years of age who had no registered health problems. The outcome was a random listing of clients fulfilling these criteria, not sorted in any way, neither alphabetically nor by birth date. Our contact phoned those on the list who had not completed high school. Starting at the top, she went down the list until she had obtained the consent to participate from 4 boys and

three girls. However, there is always a risk that this kind of recruitment process causes for example the most motivated, the most verbal or least troubled participants to give their consent, thus forming a systematically biased group of participants. Nevertheless, most participants in this group described internalizing problems and several had experienced quite severe mental health problems. Due to the modest size of the sample every person who declined to participate may thus have changed the composition of the sample in a way that might have extensively influenced the results.

To understand what separated the answers of those who had dropped out from those of high school graduates, we included a same age group (18-25) of college students. These college students were recruited from the Department of Social Work Studies at Harstad University College. They were informed that we would like to talk to both those who had struggled to graduate high school and those who did not. The students interested in participating contacted the researchers by e-mail after having been informed of the study in class. The first seven students contacting us were included in the study. It turned out that they had all struggled to graduate. Such a purposeful sample is of course also vulnerable to self-selection bias. Those who answered fast and thus were included in the study, may have differed systematically from those who contacted us later and were not included in the final sample. It did, however, provide us with a sample of individuals that had struggled with much of the same problems as the participants who had dropped out, making a comparison particularly interesting.

Due to the fact that we included two groups in this study, the number of participants in each group had to be somewhat restricted. The in-depth interviews lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours, and to keep track of such large amounts of information, it seemed

necessary to limit the number of interviews. Malterud (2001) comments that large

amounts of information do not guarantee transferability of results and may cause a

superficial analysis. Although sample sizes vary immensely, the most common sample

sizes in qualitative PhD studies have been found to be 20 and 30, followed by 40 and 10

(Mason, 2010). Nevertheless, within a homogenous population even a sample of six has

been shown sufficient to "develop meaningful themes and useful interpretations" (Guest,

Bunce, & Johnson, 2006, p. 78). A sample of fourteen is clearly at the lower end of the

spectrum, but it did allow us to immerse ourselves in the interviews, and observe

interactions of factors in each individual process, making detailed comparisons between

individuals possible. By including clinical interviews, we hopefully added to credibility

by triangulation (Creswell, 2013; Shenton, 2004), thus providing two types of data on

mental health of which only one type was self-report data. However, comparing two

such small samples makes results highly tentative, making the transference of results

difficult. Consequently, these results are merely appropriate for suggesting themes in

particular need of further exploration.

6.0. Future directions

Substantial research seems to confirm the central role of externalizing problems in school dropout processes (Breslau et al., 2011). However, among the students in study 3 who had dropped out of school and were still off track, internalizing disorders like panic disorders, social phobia, eating disorders and depression were experienced as important in their processes of disengagement from school and their disengagement from employment in the aftermath of dropout. The NLWA had not been informed of any of their mental disorders, and some of the participants were unaware that they fulfilled the criteria for certain of their own diagnoses. This lack of essential information in both parties may partly explain why some social workers at the NLWA said they found it difficult to develop effective programs for re-enrolling these young people in education and employment. Due to the research focus on externalizing disorders in dropout processes, there may be a risk of understating or ignoring the consequences of internalizing disorders, as their influence in dropout processes seems more complicated (Melkevik et al., 2016b). Such understatement might be a problem, because several studies suggest that the school environment can be an effective context for preventive interventions aimed at internalizing disorders (Neumer, Costache & Hagen, 2017). Consequently, assessing the general occurrence of specific internalizing disorders in the group of early school leavers in general and the off-track group in particular, would help to clarify if certain internalizing disorders are overrepresented in the group of dropout students struggling the most to get back on track. In a large-scale study, involving the OT and the NLWA, it would be possible to monitor the high school trajectories of a particular age cohort in schools from various counties. By monitoring a particular cohort, we could include students transitioning via graduation into further education or employment, those transitioning via dropping out into alternative education or

employment, and those transitioning into unemployment and social security benefits. The three groups should be tested for mental disorders in general, including panic disorder, social anxiety disorder, eating disorders and depression. Measuring mental health at the beginning of high school and at the end of their third year when most of those dropping out have left school, and then again five years later, would enable us to compare the occurrence of mental health disorders associated with three different kinds of trajectories: graduation trajectories, back-on-track dropout trajectories, and off-track dropout trajectories during transition into early adulthood ('back on track` dropout trajectories are when a student drops out of school but then re-enrols in some kind of education or becomes employed). In addition to having their mental health evaluated at three points in time, the participants would also be interviewed at each evaluation, focusing on their experiences with school, employment and general well-being. These data could also be helpful in disentangling whether internalizing disorders develop mainly during the school dropout process and thus become overrepresented in the group that has dropped out and are off track, or if they develop mainly as a response to the dropout event or both. Answers to these questions could be important to developing efficient interventions targeting the particular group of students who have dropped out and are off track.

Furthermore, participants in studies 1 and 3 who had dropped out and were off track, described that their experiences with "Abandonment" and "Lack of perceived social support" had weakened their intention to stay in school. The college students in study 3 described that parental presence and expectations in addition to perceived social support had bolstered their intentions to graduate. These descriptions are in line with a substantial amount of research documenting the role of family factors in fostering school

engagement (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2013; Raftery, Grolnick, & Flamm, 2016). Among family factors, SES is one of the strongest predictors of school dropout (Rumberger, 2011), although it does not provide insight into *how* families contribute to school success.

Moreover, long-term studies of parent-child relationships and school dropout are scarce (Barry & Reschly, 2012), and they rarely include data on preschool experiences. Thus, to better understand the developmental trajectories leading to dropping out of school and staying off track, the best alternative would be to follow the example of Sroufe and colleagues (2005, p. ix) and study families "to track the courses of their lives". We would suggest following high and low SES families about to have their first child through the first 30 years of the child`s life, monitoring their mastery of central developmental challenges at the various age levels, such as language acquisition, development of self-regulation, reading skills, self-efficacy, peer affiliation, and school achievement, while providing a variety of data, qualitative as well as quantitative, on parenting practices, parent-child relationship qualities and perceived social support. This kind of comprehensive monitoring of child development and family influences could give us detailed information on how families contribute to school success and on which family influences are instrumental in differentiating the trajectories of those dropping out and staying off track from other dropout and graduate trajectories.

Nonetheless, we find it interesting to further explore the experiences of those who drop out of school and stay off-track by further interviewing them explicitly as to *how* "Abandonment" and lack of perceived support have influenced their self-perceptions, their school engagement behavior, and their transition into employment and adult life.

7.0. Conclusion

In this research project, the aim was to increase the understanding of the personal school engagement experiences of students who had dropped out of high school and were off track. This perspective was partly inspired by research pointing to the risk of creating a stereotypical image of those most likely to drop out of school (De Witte et al., 2013; Janosz et al., 1997). Most research seems to focus on dropout students in general, describing one single dropout category characterized by low grades, low engagement, negative behavior, and coming from a low SES background with low-engaged parents (Bowers & Sprott, 2012; Dekkers & Claassen, 2001). However, it is only a particular sub-group of these students that experience long-term problems due to their early school-leaving (Dekkers & Claassen, 2001). The research done with this particular sub-group is quite limited. Hence, we set out to explore the subjective experiences of this sub-group of early school leavers.

The first study was based on open interviews asking rather general questions about *their experiences with education, work, friends, family, computer games, economy, the NLWA, and thoughts about the future*. How did they understand and describe what had happened to them? As we introduced the first topic, experiences with education, the participants talked about mainly three things: their family situation, their extra-familiar relationship problems, and their motivational problems at school. While proceeding from questions of education to other topics, descriptions of non-available adults and feelings of loneliness and marginalization kept reappearing no matter what questions were asked. When asked directly about why they dropped out, their explicit answers often focused on their own lack of "will power" and effort. Nevertheless, when

describing their "Amotivation", the students who had dropped out gradually included topics interpreted as the "Abandonment", "Social awkwardness" and "Social exclusion and loneliness" themes as well. Consequently, when looking at the interviews overall, the participants seemed to spend most of their time describing the demotivating effects of experiences belonging in one of the three themes associated with relationship problems.

The focus on relationship problems in general and the unavailability of parents and other adults in particular when describing school dropout processes generated an awareness of the need for a review of the research literature on attachment and dropout-related issues. Consequently, we searched for results on mediating mechanisms that might explain the association suggested in research literature (Ijzendoorn et al., 1995) and by the participants of study 1, between the quality of parent-child relationships and academic performance and school dropout. The results on mediation effects encouraged further investigation into the influence of particular mechanisms like self-regulation/ exploration, teacher-child relationships, maternal scaffolding and test anxiety (O`Connor & McCartney, 2007; West et al., 2013). The narrative review showed that there is substantial support for an *association* between positive experiences in early relationships and a readiness to socialize and becoming involved in a positive motivational dynamic. The importance of 'readiness to socialize' with parents, teachers, and peers during school years was demonstrated in a study by Furrer and Skinner (2008). The loss of such relatedness to one additional partner resulted in a significant decrement in the emotional and behavioral engagement reported by the student. This dynamic is suggested to have a potential for cascading influences into various types of behavior, among them, learning difficulties and school dropout (Furrer & Skinner, 2003;

Sroufe et al., 2005). Consequently, the interaction between socio-emotional factors and academic performance seems to offer one of the best explanation of school dropout.

Finally, we explored the motivational dynamics in some particular dropout processes. We asked what some students who had dropped out high school and some high school graduates that were now in college *perceived* to be essential influences on their school engagement or their intention to stay in or drop out of school. The participants seemed to agree on the importance of two factors. Both groups explicitly and spontaneously talked about the negative influence of mental health problems on their intention to stay in school. Although many problems were described as challenging in their coping with school, almost all who had experienced the emergence of mental health problems described these experiences as dramatically weakening their motivation to stay either in school or employment or both. What seemed to make a difference was their access to social support. The college students perceived substantial and persistent social support from several sources as enabling them to cope with their mental health problems and/or their achievement problems, and thus substantially strengthening their intention to stay in school. The students who had dropped out of school and were off track, on the other hand, perceived social support as limited and almost exclusively emotional. Their support systems were described as less flexible in eliciting necessary assistance, information and guidance in challenging situations. Thus, they became more vulnerable to stressful experiences like learning difficulties and problems with mental health.

Looking at the two empirical studies together, it became evident that the school trajectories described by individual participants differed considerably from each other. Individual descriptions in both dropout groups varied, and so did descriptions from the

college group. Some participants had learning difficulties, and others did not. A few had attention problems most of them did not. Many had experienced peer rejection, but not all. Several had had supportive teachers while others had not, and many had experienced mental health problems while others had not. However, all interviews across both studies and irrespective of graduation status had one thing in common: *the participants spent much of their interviews describing their relationships with parents, peers, and teachers*. The students in study 1 who had dropped out of school, focused on preoccupied parents and absent fathers and sometimes absent mothers when describing their "Amotivation" at school. The students in study 3 who had dropped out of school, were more explicit in their descriptions of experiences with distant teachers, rejecting peers and limited family networks as important factors in their motivational dynamics. The college students emphasised the importance of involved and supportive parents, functioning as efficient support generalists (Thompson & Goodvin, 2016) connecting their children with the wider social world, enabling them to access resources and elicit necessary support from others. Accordingly, all participants, college students and off-track students who had dropped out of school in both studies, experienced relationships with parents, teachers and peers to be essential influences in their motivational dynamics, influencing their school engagement, their ability to cope with mental health problems, and their intention to stay in or drop out of school.

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