ARTICLE

Staying in school, not dropping out – pupils' voices

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Abstract

This article asks: *What can highly motivated pupils in upper secondary school tell us about dropout and relations?* Bauman's concepts: 'liquid identity' (2011) and 'instant living' (2012), as well as literature on 'relations' (Spurkeland, 2011; Drugli, 2012) provide the theoretical backdrop for the study. The findings are based on nine individual interviews with pupils, each lasted approximately one hour. They share their thoughts, beliefs and experiences relating to school days, workloads, relations to others, school subjects and dropout. The study shows that also highly motivated pupils do think about dropping out from school, and they present ways to establish relations in class, both inter-personally and in school-subject settings.

Keywords: North Norway; upper secondary school; qualitative research; dropout; relations

Introduction

Upper secondary school dropout rates have received extensive attention in the field of education in Europe. The European Commission's (2015) report *Schools policy – A whole school approach to tackling early school leaving*, a part of the European Education & Training 2020 strategy, cites 2014 Eurostat data showing that 11.1% of European 18- to 24-year-olds leave education without completing an upper secondary programme. According to the European Commission (2015), early school leaving (ESL) is an undesirable outcome because the completion of upper secondary school is considered essential to find work and help young adults become "fulfilled and active citizens" (p. 6). The Commission stresses the connections between education level, chances of employment, economic growth and participation in society. On an individual level, growth for Europe means completing education, entering the job market and actively participating in the community. The European Commission (2015) suggests that ESL is caused by a combination of personal, social, economic, educational and family-related factors, as well as factors relating to features of education and training systems. Investing to support young people in their efforts to complete upper secondary school is important, as "early leavers from education and training face a higher risk of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion" (The Council of the European Union, 2015, p. 6). The present article identifies ways to provide such support, presented through the voices of nine pupils in upper secondary school.

The Nordic system of education is based on values usually linked to the welfare state. Examples include equality of justice, solidarity, social mobility, inclusion and individually adapted education (Telhaug, Mediås and Aasen, 2006). It is a comprehensive school system that emphasises both economic and social objectives and contends that a high level of education means better prospects for economic growth and greater equality for all within a class-less society (Telhaug, Mediås and Aasen, 2006). A primary goal of this system is to provide education that secures the same opportunities for all pupils. This model of education is considered a global standard due to its value orientation, its inclusion of all children in regular school and its system of un-streamed, mixed-ability classes (Imsen, Blossing and Moos, 2016). However, though Norway's model is seen as ideal, the country's dropout rates from upper secondary school are high: Only 73% of pupils complete upper secondary school within five years (Statistics Norway, 2017a). In a comparison of the 34 European countries included in Eurostat's (2018) overview of pupils who do not continue school after lower secondary school, Norway comes in tenth place. The only other Nordic country with a higher rate of youth with no more than lower secondary school education is Iceland (Eurostat, 2018).

A prerequisite for equal opportunity is that pupils stay in school and complete their education (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2011). However, despite large investments to address high dropout rates from upper secondary schools in Norway (Svarstad, 2015), the numbers remain high (Statistics Norway, 2017a). Furthermore, though

research on dropout exists, a majority are quantitative statistical studies (Markussen, Frøseth, Lødding and Sandberg, 2008; Markussen, Lødding, Sandberg and Vibe, 2006; Markussen and Sandberg, 2005, 2004; Markussen, 2003). These studies present detailed overviews of dropout and completion rates among large cohorts of Norwegian pupils over a number of years. Some qualitative studies do exist (Bjøru, 2016, 2009; Reegård and Rogstad [Eds.], 2016), but these focus mostly on pupils who have dropped out from school, their reasons for dropping out and what happens to them after they drop out. They do not explore what the pupils who *stay in* school can tell us about dropout. This new angle on the topic offers a new lens to explore school dropout.

After working as a teacher in upper secondary school for ten years myself and completing two studies about pupils who dropped out of upper secondary school (Bjøru, 2016, 2009), I assumed that so-called 'strong' pupils rarely had issues relating to dropping out. However, in the present study, circumstances relating to getting access to do field work led me to a group of 'strong' or 'highly motivated' upper secondary school pupils. Here, 'highly motivated' means pupils with passing grades in all subjects and minimal absences. This new perspective challenged my assumptions and made me curious to learn about the experiences and views that this group of pupils held relating to dropout.

This article presents interviews with nine Norwegian upper secondary school 'highly motivated' pupils. In Norway, upper secondary school is years 11 through 13, with pupils 16 to 19 years old. The pupils in this study are in their first year of upper secondary school, are 16 years of age, and follow the academic line of study, which qualifies for higher education. They share their thoughts, beliefs and experiences relating to school days, workloads, relations to others, school subjects and dropout. The present study contributes to extant knowledge primarily by giving these pupils a voice and secondarily by building an understanding of what they consider important in their everyday school lives. The article aims to answer the following question: *What can highly motivated pupils in upper secondary school tell us about dropout and relations?*

Theoretical background

Liquid identity and instant living

Bauman (2012, 2011, 1997) provides a theoretical context to help make sense of the pupils' perspectives. His work speaks to me when he elaborates on the shifts in society from the modern to the post-modern era and how these changes may influence people. Reading Bauman has introduced me to concepts and ideas that not only describe the world to which I belong, but also problematise the challenges faced by people in the 21st century: issues like globalisation, migration, multiculturalism and consumerism, to name a few. I use some of Bauman's (2012, 2011) concepts as backdrop for this study because his ideas about today's world correlate to the pupils' stories. Furthermore, Bauman is talented at combining common

words to create new ones that I believe function well both figuratively and creatively when used to characterise societal phenomena.

Bauman's concepts are widely referenced in scholarly work on, for instance, modern and post-modern society, sociology and ethics (Nielsen, 2017). Bauman (2012) does not discuss dropout from upper secondary school directly; rather, he focuses on how post-modern society creates a dichotomy between strangers who live on the fringe of society and people's need to belong to a community. I believe that his ideas about strangers and community, when transferred to a school setting, offer new awareness of the mechanisms that lead pupils to either stay in or drop out of school. Concepts particularly useful for shedding new light on the topic of dropout are *liquid identity* (Bauman, 2011, p. 18) and *instant living* (Bauman, 2012, p. 123). These concepts are useful when attempting to comprehend today's society and its effects on youth and their school experiences. Therefore, I have used these two concepts as lenses through which to view and discuss the interviewees' answers about dropout from a new perspective. Discussing dropout against this new backdrop leads to new insights and alternative understandings.

Bauman (2011) claims that the idea of progress is central to all spheres of society and that it has shifted from being about a "shared improvement of life to [being about] a discourse of personal survival" (p. 24). Today, progress is viewed:

> …in the context of a desperate effort not to fall off the track and to avoid disqualification and exclusion from the race. We think of 'progress' in the context not of raising our status, but of avoiding failure. (Bauman, 2011, p. 24)

The constant effort to avoid making mistakes or risk disappointment, rather than develop and grow, forces us to learn to "change [our] identity (or at least its public manifestation) as often, as fast and as efficiently as [we] change [our] shirt or [our] socks" (Bauman, 2011, p. 25). Thus, identities become liquid. However, a *liquid identity* also implies a tension between "the fear of being different and the fear of losing individuality" (Bauman, 2011, p. 20). We want to be part of a bigger community, but we also have a strong sense of uniqueness. As we continuously shift between these two domains, so, too, does our identity, becoming 'liquid'. This concept describes the context of this study: upper secondary school, where pupils are likely to face conflicting desires to be independent and belong to a group.

Instant living is a sub-heading in one of Bauman's (2012, p. 123) books, and I think the concept does an excellent job of capturing postmodern life. For most job-seekers, the goal is no longer a long-term position involving "attachment (. . .) or lasting commitment" (Bauman, 2012, p. 124). Rather, "[t]he 'short term' has replaced the 'long term' and made of instantaneity its ultimate ideal" (Bauman, 2012, p. 125). Today, immediacy is a personal

quality that is considered not only important, but also beneficial. Instant changes in the events of everyday life demand instant action and an ability to master quick shifts. Our most precious modern possessions, such as "cellular telephones (invented for the use of the nomad who needs to be 'constantly in touch'), portable and disposable belongings – are the prime cultural tokens of the era of instantaneity" (Bauman, 2012, p. 128). This tendency toward the 'instant' is highly relevant for pupils in upper secondary school, who must juggle school, extracurricular activities, work, family, social media and much more.

Bauman (1997) uses the metaphor of game to illustrate the life of people in the postmodern era, and I think it connects very well with the concept of *instant living*. He writes:

> In the life-game of postmodern men and women the rules of the game keep changing in the course of playing. The sensible strategy is therefore to keep each game short – so that a sensibly played game of life calls for the splitting of one big all-embracing game with huge and costly stakes into a series of brief and narrow games with small, not-too-precious ones. (Bauman, 1997, p. 89)

This illustrates the importance of handling quick shifts rather than depending on long-term plans. This, again, is linked to upper secondary school pupils and the choices they must make concerning everything from small things in everyday life to bigger decisions about their future.

Relations as inter-personal

Bauman (2012) claims that it is important for all people to feel as if they belong to a 'community', and such a 'community' could be understood as a class of pupils. Scholarly works on relations in school, and the impact of such relations on school settings, help illustrate how a pupil may gain a sense of belonging to a school class. I borrow ideas about relations in school from Drugli (2012) because her work is from a Norwegian school setting and, therefore, relevant for the present study.

According to Drugli (2012), a relation is an interrelated relationship in which both parties regard each other as independent beings that are part of the same reality. She notes that "all humans need to engage in close social relations with others. For children and youth, this need must be met both at home and in school" (2012, p. 21, author's translation). The school must assist in the development of social relations by securing numerous "interactions" (Drugli, 2012, p. 29, author's translation) between teachers and pupils and encouraging teachers to be sensitive and responsive towards pupils.

Drugli (2012, p. 37) uses the word 'chemistry' to explain what happens when it is easy to establish good relations with pupils: "it happens by itself, and it is often described as if the two parts have good chemistry" (Drugli, 2012, author's translation). However, when discussing

what to do if class relations are not developing in a positive way, Drugli (2012) suggests that the teacher seeks advice from colleagues, school administration or tutoring services. She does not discuss whether communicating with the pupils themselves could be useful; however, she does identify several qualities that pupils have stressed as important for good relations: teachers making lessons interesting; pupils getting attention; teachers listening to pupils, trusting them and acting friendly; teachers asking pupils whether they need help; and teachers using humour (Drugli, 2012). Drugli (2012) also underlines the role of relations among pupils in making pupils feel that they belong to the class. Specifically, she advises facilitating pupils' social interaction by providing role models who share warmth and respect. This should happen during all forms of classroom activities; for instance teachers' presentation and explanation, class discussions, group and pair work, pupils' presentations and individual study. Drugli's (2012) insights into the role of relations in school and how best to create good relations in a classroom are useful to all who are preoccupied with how to best support pupils in their effort to thrive in school.

Relations and school-subjects

Spurkeland (2011) discusses relations in general, but also writes extensively about a topic relevant to the present work: obligatory dialogues in school. One such dialogue is the "pupils' dialogue" (Spurkeland, 2011, p. 160, author's translation), which I choose to call 'feedback talk'. The purpose of feedback talk is to secure "relations, contact, confidence and collaboration in school" (Spurkeland, 2011, p. 161, author's translation). Such talk creates an opportunity for the pupil to be alone with the teacher, prompting a "unique possibility for open and free dialogue" (Spurkeland, 2011, p. 161, author's translation). The aim is, according to Spurkeland (2011), to establish a good relation, receive information and knowledge about the pupil, solve any challenge the pupil faces related to learning, and process the social conditions of which the pupil is a part.

Spurkeland (2011) argues that pupils should experience feedback talks as useful and pupil-driven; the pupils should speak most, triggered by the teacher's questions. In addition, both the pupils and the teacher should write a log for each feedback talk to remember the topic of conversation and the agreements made during the talk. Such logs make it easier to check whether the pupils have reached the goals to which they previously agreed when they meet again for another talk (Spurkeland, 2011). These feedback talks should happen monthly, or at least three times in the fall term and four times in the spring term, for continuity and effect. Spurkeland (2011) writes that private meetings with the teacher represent luxury time for the students that should be repeated regularly and that they are a way to build relations while connected to pupils within the frame of regular school hours.

Spurkeland's (2011) concepts are relevant to include in a discussion about dropout and the role of relations in upper secondary school because he uses specific examples from the field

of practice. Thus, he offers a more hands-on perception of what to do in school that may help support pupils. Instead of merely suggesting ideas of how to enhance relations, he includes useful examples to be implemented in the classroom.

Methodology

The context of the study

The present study is carried out in Finnmark, the northernmost county of Norway. Finnmark borders Russia to the east, Finland to the south, the neighbouring county Troms to the west and the Barents Sea to the north. Finnmark is slightly bigger than Denmark, but has only approximately 75,000 inhabitants. Its vast area contains 12 upper secondary schools, which means that many pupils move away from home at the age of 16 to pursue upper secondary school. Finnmark also has the highest dropout rate in Norway, with a completion rate of only 64.3% (Statistics Norway, 2017b). Thus, this county is a particularly interesting context in the debate concerning the role of education, youth and future prospects.

This study focuses on pupils' stories and subjective experiences within the context of a school setting. Thus, the study has a social constructivist backdrop and, more specifically, a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2017). The study's objective is to learn about a group of pupils' thoughts about the specific topic, or phenomenon, school dropout and relations in class.

The pupils were in the first grade of upper secondary school, or their eleventh year of school. I had spent some time with the class before the interviews. I conducted observations on the pupils' first day of school and over a four-week period in the spring term. I also handed out a questionnaire at the end of the first term. Thus, I believe that the pupils felt as if they knew me a little bit before the interviews took place. To stress the study's reliability or trustworthiness (Brenner, 2006), it is relevant to mention that the pupils knew about my former experience as a teacher, my interest in learning from them about school and my perception of them as owners of "expert knowledge" on the topic of interest. This supports the study's validity, or the suitability of the method used to examine what the study is meant to examine (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). As the aim was to learn from the pupils themselves and present their voices, I considered qualitative interviews to be the best way to collect data, as these permit admission into pupils' "expert knowledge".

The interviews

To address the research question of this article and present the pupils' voices as clearly as possible (Creswell, 2017), I needed to hear them speak in their own words. Thus, I chose a qualitative approach with individual interviews, as this allowed each pupil to present his or her own life experience and personal opinion about the topic in private (Johannessen, Tufte, and Kristoffersen, 2008). The class comprised 29 pupils, of whom nine came forward and wanted

to be interviewed when I asked. The interviews took place at the end of the second term, when the pupils were close to finishing their first year of upper secondary school. We met at their natural setting: their school during school hours, when the pupils had free time between lessons. Each of the nine interviews lasted approximately one hour and was audio recorded. Because I had previous experience working as a teacher in upper secondary school, I had to be conscious of my prior knowledge about the school setting to which the interviewees belonged (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). Furthermore, since I had done fieldwork among the pupils prior to the interviews, we had already met when the interviews took place. This meant that I needed to be aware of the pupils' impression of me and my role as a researcher and consider whether this would influence the information they gave during the interviews (Thagaard, 2009).

The interviews were semi-structured. I used a list of topics and questions to help me remember what to ask about and to ensure that I asked all interviewees about the same things. The interview guide was generated from my initial interest in learning from the pupils and the theoretical concepts presented above. It comprised eight sections: presentation, transfer, relations, school organisation, school intentions, dropout, the future and closure. The material that emerged from the nine recorded hours of individual interviews was vast. Choosing from the material required a focused reading of the transcripts, following an analysis process directed by the research question. This means that I read and re-read the transcripts to search for elements that answered one or both parts of the research question: What do pupils think about dropout and what do they think about relations? Quotes that included viewpoints about these two elements were marked. After writing out these parts separately, I saw that the pupils' stories about relations could be categorised into two parts; inter-personal or related to school subjects, to support a better overview and a clearer approach in the discussion. Keeping the questions in mind both throughout the reading process and during the categorisation of the answers added to the validity of the study. Throughout the work, from deciding on a topic to interviewing, transcribing, analysing and writing out the findings, a focus on presenting the interviewees' worldviews as accurately as possible is critical to secure validity (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). Therefore, I have followed this approach in answering the research question.

Ethical considerations and limitations
I found several ethical considerations (Creswell, 2007) to be particularly important to this study. Firstly, all the pupils were 16 or older, so no parental consent was needed; however, the pupils signed a consent form informing them about the research process, anonymity and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Secondly, I chose to give each of the nine informants names simply by using the first nine letters of the alphabet: A through I. To secure anonymity, I chose unisex English and Norwegian names (Alvesson, 2011). The sound files from the interviews were transferred to my computer and transcribed into text. For this article,

the pupils' stories have been translated from Norwegian into English. I have been careful to choose words that ensure the pupils' tone of voice is recognised in another language. Since the point of the study is to present the participants' meaning (Creswell, 2007), the language they use is important. For validation purposes, the presented results were also sent to the informants by e-mail for member check so that they could read through and give feedback on whether they recognised the data and agreed that it could be used in the article (Creswell, 2007). An obvious limitation of the present work is that I interviewed only nine pupils; therefore, the findings cannot be understood as generalisable or representative of the views of all 16-year-old pupils (Eisenhart, 2009). Still, this study's findings may have "user generalizability" (Eisenhart, 2009, p. 57) meaning that readers may recognise the conclusions, transfer them to their own contexts and benefit from them in their own practice.

Results

The presentation of the results is divided into three parts. This structure creates an overview of the results that answers the article's research question: *What can highly motivated pupils in upper secondary school tell us about dropout and relations?* The first part of the results presents what the pupils said about dropout. The second part presents their thoughts on relations as inter-personal. The third part draws a link between relations and school subjects.

Sharing thoughts about school dropout

When asked about whether they ever thought about dropping out of school, eight pupils answered yes. Alex said, "Yes, I am so sick of school. I got a low mark on one test right after Christmas […] and it almost tipped me over. […] I am more sick of school now than ever. We have so many tests at the same time". Chris answered: "I think most of the classmates think about it. [School] becomes boring". Dan also answered in the affirmative, saying, "Yes, but I will never do so [drop out]", while Eli responded, "Yes. Sometimes the workload is so big that I think I cannot handle this: […] This is not working out; I want to drop out; I cannot bear this".

"Yes, of course, I have wanted to drop out", said Freddy, continuing, "especially at the beginning of the second term and during the exam period. Then, I only wanted to quit school". Gerd's response was similar: "Of course. I have thought about it often".

Hedly, who lived alone, said:

> Yes, […] especially in the dark period of the year, when it was cold and dark and I felt so homesick that I only wanted to go home. I wanted to drop out, especially after Christmas. I kept thinking that it would change to the better, but I became sick of telling myself that because it did not get better. […] However, inside I knew that I would continue [school]. It only takes time, and all of a sudden you reach a point when you change your mind.

Iben also shared that "that thought [of dropping out] has occurred [to me] many times".

Even though eight of the nine pupils had considered dropping out of school, none had done so. However, the interviewees' responses suggest that the assumption that pupils who come to school every day, are hardly ever absent and receive good marks, never struggle with issues around school dropout seems incorrect. For some of my interviewees, the wish to give up was particularly strong when their workload was heavy or when they had many assessments and tests during a short time span. For others, the thought was not triggered by any particular circumstance, but simply arose now and then. For Hedly, temptations to drop out were connected to the wintertime, when the sun is below the horizon. Such a tendency is understandable, since it is not uncommon for people to be affected by the polar night period in different ways (see, for instance, Arendt, 2012).

Relations as inter-personal
One of the sections in the interview guide focused on relations, with sub-questions about how the class environment was established and what it meant for the individual pupil. Alex responded to these prompts as follows: "All pupils get along. All can collaborate in all subjects. [We] can choose to sit where we want, instead of being placed together". Chris discussed the class environment, saying:

> [we have] no practical subjects beside physical education, so it becomes boring after a while. So it is good to have other activities sometimes, such as film and stuff, as a change. It strengthens the sense of unity in class, and I think it is because, then, we do something that everyone likes. Everyone becomes happy.

Dan talked about a game the pupils played with one of the teachers, saying, "It is important that we do not only focus on subjects. […] It is important to play games. It has created motivation to learn more". Gerd also talked about some getting-to-know-each-other games in which the pupils participated on their first day of school:

> The games worked well. Then, we got to know each other a bit, instead of only knowing who we each were. It creates chemistry in class […] You are going to spend five days a week for three years with the class, so good chemistry in a class is important. It is motivation to come to school.

Hedly also elaborated on the games:

> The games have made us more open towards each other and make us dare to talk in groups and stuff. […] We sat in a ring and got tasks: Say the first thing you thought

about when you woke up. Or we had a box of diamonds, gave one to another pupil and explained why we chose to give it to him or her. Or give the diamond to someone you would like to get to know better. Or say something about the school year or the last time we felt happy. And one thing outside of [our] comfort zone: All pupils drew a name and had to say something positive about the person.

The one pupil who had not thought about dropping out, Bo, also talked about the class environment and relations:

> The games at the start of the year depend on the teacher we have. The different teachers do different things. […] One teacher took us out hiking and we ate together in a shelter in the woods. All of us sat there. It helped. You talk about other stuff than school. […] It is easier to include all [pupils] when we are outdoors.

Iben mentioned different forms of activities:

> We went on a trip in the beginning [of the school year]. We have done many nice things: a common get-together before Christmas and stuff. I think it is important to do such activities because you get a more positive view on school: It is not only tough days. It was positive and important, and our class is a tightly knit group and a good class.

Eli's opinion was that the class environment was good due to luck:

> [We] were lucky with the people we were grouped with. All are easy-going and easily talk to others. It makes it easy to get to know each other. They might have more problems with that in other classes. We were just lucky. For instance, field trips: We went hiking to a mountain and sat together talking, also with those that we normally do not spend much time with.

Freddy claimed that "we have a good class environment, and I believe everyone thrives in our class", but also stressed that:

> It is not the teachers who have created the good class environment; it is the pupils. We are open-minded, can say things, some knew each other before, and if you get to know one other person in class and sit together with the rest, then it is easy to get to know the rest.

The pupils agreed that they had a good class-environment: that they "get along" and that there is a "sense of unity" or "chemistry" in class. Many mentioned the importance of doing

"other activities", such as field trips, watching films or playing games, to help the pupils open up to and get to know one another. One said that a good class environment is a motivating factor to attend school. All in all, the interviewees' responses suggest that alternative activities besides regular work with classroom subjects is important. One student also noted that such activities help create "a tightly knit group and a good class".

Relations and school subjects

Another section of the interview guide dealt with school organisation. Some of the sub-questions were: Does the school work to create good relations in class? If so, how does the school work to create good relations in class? All nine interviewees talked about how focusing on relations does not necessarily need to happen outside of the regular activities of the school day or in extra-curricular activities; relations can also be built during class time.

Alex exemplified this by saying:

> [Relations are supported by] the feedback talks [that we have with the teachers] once every term. You get to know your mark and say whether you like the subject. [It is] nice to have that talk so you know your mark and can work harder if it is not so good. Make some agreements. It is mostly about subjects; you do not get to know the teacher better.

Similarly, Eli spoke about the feedback talks as follows:

> I do not think about them as talks. But I think it is nice that they exist because if there is anything I need to say, it is nice to be alone with the teacher and ask how I can do more and ask why I got that mark. We only have ten minutes between each session, so no time to really sit down with the teacher.

Bo also mentioned the feedback talks:

> Some teachers only say the mark, while others say that you work in this and that way, which gives a boost. The [talks with the] teachers who only give the mark feel like a waste of time. Some teachers say more, but most teachers do not. Then, it feels like waste of time because I already know the mark I'm on.

In addition, Bo stressed the common Facebook group of which all pupils are members, and noted:

> We use the chat most about homework, raise questions that all are part of. We share important information, such as change of classrooms. It has a good tone. We back each other up.

Chris also mentioned the Facebook group, saying:

> We share more than most would think. If someone cannot figure out the homework, another one will share the answer there. It helps. Ninety percent of what is said in there is about the different assignments we have gotten. We help each other.

Freddy said, "We have a group chat on Facebook. We share information and can ask each other". Iben commented: "It is very often that we give each other the answers when we work with assignments. The classmates support each other. Especially on our Facebook group, we help each other".

Dan suggested that "the teaching should be more interesting, varied: film, photos, group work. [We] do not need to have tests after all activities. For instance, group work with presentations in front of the rest of the group only, no marks. Now, we have too many hand-ins. It is not motivating". Gerd advised the teachers to make learning activities more practical and even bring them outdoors:

> Take the learning activity outside, like we did in the beginning of the year in science. We were out in nature and had science class there instead of inside stuffy classrooms with bad air at the end of the school day. We had a quiz, looked at a moraine [a line of earth deposited by a glacier], had food and a bonfire, [were] social, got to spend time together. It is so easy to get annoyed with each other inside the classroom late in the day.

Hedly noted that the pupils share tests and test results when they are handed back by the teacher:

> We share marks and we have a high level [good marks]. I feel that I can share my results. When we get work back, we ask each other what [mark] we got, and then we swap and look at each other's work. […] You can borrow someone's work to check the things you did not manage to do.

The questions in this section were: Does the school work to create good relations in class, and, if so, how does the school work to create good relations in class? Some of the pupils answered that the feedback talks and the Facebook group contributed to building relations. However, other pupils did not mention these at all, merely suggesting what teachers should

do to avoid making pupils annoyed and to create more motivation. It is interesting that one pupil answered "sharing results" when asked about whether and how school work can help to create relations, as this might represent a new avenue for many teachers seeking to find ways to enhance relations.

Discussion

Why is it significant that the pupils had thought about dropping out?

One way of reading the pupils' responses through the lenses of Bauman's (2012, 2011) concepts of *liquid identity* and *instant living* suggests that highly motivated pupils are influenced by the constant shift and identity changes in their instant lives. As mentioned in the article's introduction, prior to conducting this study, I had assumed that highly motivated pupils rarely have issues relating to dropping out. However, all but one of the pupils said that they had thought about dropping out, and Alex, Eli and Freddy connected such thoughts to heavy workloads or numerous tests at the same time or in the same week. Their way of thinking about how to, in Bauman's (2011) words, "avoid disqualification […] and failure" (p. 24) was to drop out of school.

The interviewees were part of the larger community of their class, and they all received good results on their schoolwork, giving them a common identity. Simultaneously, however, the pupils held on to their individuality (Bauman, 2011), which sometimes differed from the bigger community. Instead of presenting themselves as pupils who never doubt their success in school (bigger community), Gerd and Iben admitted that they (individually) think about quitting. The shift between these two attitudes can be understood, in Bauman's (2011) terms, as indicating a *liquid identity*.

Dan had thought about dropping out, but said that he would never go through with it, while Chris believed that "most of the classmates think about [dropping out]". Hedly's desire to drop out was prompted not by the workload, but by difficulties with the polar night, which led to alternating feelings of wanting to quit and knowing "inside" that it would not happen. Together, the pupils exhibited changes in their commitments to school, a tendency to forget long-term plans and shifts between thinking about dropping out and staying in school from one moment to the next. In sum, they represent living in an "era of instantaneity" (Bauman, 2012, p. 128).

Liquid identities and *instant living* mean that the pupils continuously change their mindsets about their lives and whereabouts. My findings show that pupils' devotion and enthusiasm towards school are likely to change repeatedly over the course of both a school year and their whole school career. Thoughts about dropping out seem normal and should perhaps be as common a topic for pupils to discuss as to think about.

Teachers' opportunities to create interpersonal relations

Engaging in close social relations with others in school is important (Drugli, 2012), and the interviewees shared various ways in which they experienced such engagement. Bo talked about a hiking trip to a shelter, Chris said that watching films together created a sense of unity, and Iben mentioned the class' get-together before Christmas. These are examples of how the school creates opportunities for "interaction" (Drugli, 2012, p. 29, author's translation). Such events assist in establishing relations, which, in turn, support pupils' desire to stay in school.

Gerd and Dan also mentioned how games they played helped them get to know one another and motivated them to learn more. A teacher who initiates games in which the pupils, as Hedly explained, have to say what they thought when they first woke up, give a diamond to another pupil and explain why or describe the last time they felt happy could be characterised as both sensitive and responsive. According to Drugli (2012), these are qualities that help teachers develop relations. The nature of the tasks that this teacher gave the pupils when they sat in a circle shows that the teacher, as role model, was willing to facilitate the pupils' social interaction, which is one of Drugli's (2012) specific recommendations to establish relations. Gerd said that these games helped create "chemistry in class", which is important for both establishing good relations (Drugli, 2012) and motivating pupils to come to school. Thus, the findings offer practical examples of how to establish good chemistry, by playing games first, to lay the groundwork for creating good relations in school classes.

Alex, Eli and Freddy attributed their good class environment to the group of pupils, rather than the efforts of the teachers. Alex simply said: "all pupils get along". Similarly, Eli said that all the pupils "easily talk to others", while Freddy responded that "we are open-minded [and] can say things". However, it is likely that the pupils feel this way because they have a class environment that allows students to collaborate, talk and state their opinions. According to Drugli (2012), an environment in which students are trusted and get attention is important for good relations.

Opportunities for building relations in school subject settings

Spurkeland's (2011) pupils' dialogue, which I call feedback talks, became a topic in the interviews because the interviewees mentioned them when asked about school organisation. According to Spurkeland (2011), feedback talks create a unique opportunity for teachers and pupils to talk alone, establish relations of confidence and make agreements about pupils' possible challenges and goals. The interviewees in this study said that feedback talks are useful. However, Eli said that the talks last too briefly to really sit down with the teacher for a proper conversation, and Alex said that they do not increase the students' knowledge of the teachers. Bo even suggested that feedback talks in which the pupil only learned his or her mark were a waste of time.

These findings suggest that feedback talks, which Spurkeland (2011) highlighted as an important arena for building relations directly in connection with classroom subjects, have not been used to their full potential among the pupils in this study. Spurkeland (2011) wrote that feedback talks should include log-writing to support better follow-up during monthly meetings. The findings in this study show that the interviewed pupils participated in feedback talks, as Alex said, only once every term in each subject. Also, such talks appeared to be brief and to provide no real setting for establishing relations. It is worth examining the potential of these feedback talks and change their content to achieve optimal results.

Some interviewees highlighted the class' Facebook group, which they used to collaborate with schoolwork and help each other with tasks and assessments. This group is worth mentioning, as digital competencies and the use of digital tools are among the basic skills in Norwegian education (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2012). The interviewees identified an effective and easy way of naturally integrating digital competencies into their school subjects. More importantly, when the use of social media helps to lay the ground for collaboration on a common platform that includes all pupils, it is also a concrete example of how to facilitate pupils to establish and keep relations.

Finally, some of the interviewees suggested ways that teachers should work to create good relations in class. Dan suggested organising non-graded assessments, Hedly said that a culture of sharing marks is helpful because it allows students to check on more difficult tasks, and Gerd recommended taking subject teaching outside of the classroom more often. I include these answers here because they add to the overall presentation of the pupils' voices and their opinions about the opportunities that exist for building relations in school subject settings.

Conclusion

This study sought to answer: *What can highly motivated pupils in upper secondary school tell us about dropout and relations?* The core of the study is the pupils' stories and their subjective experiences in school. The findings show that highly motivated pupils think about dropping out, indicating that this is a common thought among youth in upper secondary school. If dropping out is a common notion among pupils, it should be a topic of discussion in schools and classrooms among teachers, staff and pupils. It is possible that discussing dropping out in the open might create opportunities for pupils to express their worries and participate in changing their school days to reduce dropout rates.

According to the pupils in this study, building a class environment dominated by good relations helps pupils stay in school. As one pupil said, good chemistry motivates pupils to come to school. A class environment with good chemistry may develop when, for instance,

pupils engage in activities in which they share experiences and compliment one another. This happens when the pupils play games, share school results, in feedback talks and through common platforms on social media in which all pupils participate together. Since youth use social media extensively, it might be a good idea for schools to actively use a variety of platforms that make the whole class active users of the same network. Not only would such a step create a sense of inclusion and good relations, as the interviewees in this study mentioned, but it may also help to teach pupils about media awareness.

Both teachers and pupils may contribute to the development of good relations: teachers by setting the stage for and allowing pupils to interact with one another and pupils by showing respect and caring for one another. Teachers should also consider incorporating more non-graded assessments and creating more varied school days by, for instance, arrange group work and occasionally bring the lesson outside of the classroom. In short, according to the interviewees, variations in subject settings, interactions among everyone present in the classroom, and good teacher–pupil and pupil–pupil relations can encourage pupils to attend school.

The objective of this study was to learn about a group of pupils' thoughts about school dropout and relations in class. The pupils who participated in this study expressed personal thoughts about dropout and identified things that helped them build relations and engage in social interactions in class, both inter-personally and in subject settings. Though the study presents the qualitative viewpoints of a small number of pupils, discussing and sharing their suggestions for how to create a good class environment is vital, especially because a good class environment is connected to staying in school. Presenting the pupils' own voices is also important because pupils are the core of any school's business and the experts of their own 'instant lives'.

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