

Mette Bunting

Department of Educational Science
University College of Southeast Norway
E-mail: mette.bunting@usn.no

Geir H. Moshuus

Department of Health, Social and Welfare Studies
University College of Southeast Norway
E-mail: geir.moshuus@usn.no

Young peoples' own stories about dropping out in Norway: An indirect qualitative approach

Sammendrag

Mye forskning om skoleavbrudd i videregående opplæring ser på risikofaktorer, som sosio-økonomisk bakgrunn, grunnskolepoeng og kjønn, og kan derfor sies å fokusere på individuelle og strukturelle faktorer. Artikkelen argumenterer for heller å se på skoleavbrudd som et samspill eller møte mellom individet og systemet, det individuelle og strukturelle. Forskningen baseres på data fra en longitudinell kvalitativ studie i sitt fjerde år. Informantene er ungdom i NAV-systemet som har sluttet på videregående skole, men som fortsatt har skolerett. Gjennom den indirekte metoden, en intervjumetode basert på etnografiske intervjuer, søkes det å legge til rette for at ungdommene kan fortelle sine historier med egne ord og på sin måte. Disse fortellingene belyser avbruddsprosessen, og beskriver opplevelser forut for avbruddet. Funnene viser at selv om ungdommene sier dette skjer på grunn av enkelthendelser, belyser fortellingene deres at dette er komplekse prosesser som ligger til grunn, gjerne år tilbake. Artikkelen konkluderer med at sosialt medierte prosesser også utenfor skole, må vektlegges for å kunne forstå skoleavbrudd.

Nøkkelord: frafall, kvalitativ longitudinell studie, livshistorier, etnografisk intervju, ungdom, videregående skole

Abstract

Research on dropout from upper secondary school usually focuses on risk factors such as socioeconomic background, previous academic results and gender—that is, on individual and structural factors. The present article argues for a shift of focus, looking at dropping out as an interaction between the person and the system—between the individual and the structural. This research draws on interview data from a longitudinal qualitative study (now in its fourth year) of young people both in and out of school. The informants were young dropouts

currently in the welfare system. Using the indirect method (developed from ethnographic interviews), the interviewer sought to establish an environment in which these young people could use their own words when sharing their stories. Those stories provide an insight into the processes and experiences prior to the event of dropping out. The findings show that although young people describe dropping out as a singular event, their stories indicate complex preceding processes, often from some years before. The article concludes that socially mediated interactions between the individual and the structural, both inside school and out of school, must be considered when seeking to understand why young people drop out.

Keywords: dropout, qualitative longitudinal study, life stories, ethnographic interview, youth, upper secondary school

Introduction

Reducing the high dropout rate in upper secondary school has become a challenge in many countries. In contemporary Norwegian society, schooling influences how young people develop both socially and personally (Arnesen & Sørli, 2010; Frønes, 2010). From this perspective, their school careers link to their adult lives, determining whether they will find work, where they will live, and their ability to participate in society (Falch & Nyhus, 2011).

In the surge of research on school dropout in Norway (cf. Sletten & Hyggen, 2013), most studies view this primarily as a consequence of individual or structural problems that marginalise these young people. According to Rumberger (2011), those who drop out are part of a social group of marginalised youth defined by “an array of factors” (p. 158). Here, we approach schooling from another perspective, inspired by studies like Fine (1991) and Brown and Rodriguez (2009), which emphasise the interactions between the individual student and their surroundings. From this viewpoint, students do not drop out of education primarily because of aggregated risk factors. Instead, students with these aggregated risks are caught up in socially mediated interactions between students and the educational system that reduce the student’s options to stay on and graduate. Our research question is: *How do young people’s stories explain what led to dropping out of school?*

Using data from a longitudinal qualitative research project following about 70 youths over a ten-year period,¹ this article focuses on twice-interviewed young people who have dropped out and are in the welfare system. To voice their stories, an indirect approach has been used (Moshuus & Eide, 2016; Moshuus, 2012), in which the interview is more like a conversation, encouraging open-ended narratives. The findings indicate that while students identify a specific event or reasons for dropping out, their stories entail many

more complexities that must be unravelled if we are to understand why the individual ended up outside education. Like Brown and Rodriguez (2009), we found our informants at the losing end of their interactions with the educational system. However, where Brown and Rodriguez focused on the role played by the schools, the stories documented here suggest that attention must also be paid to out-of-school interactions if the current situation is to be improved.

Background and research

Upper secondary school is not compulsory in Norway, but young people are entitled to schooling from age 16 to 21. However, they must compete for a place in the study programme of their choice, based on their academic achievements from lower secondary school. The total number of available study programmes is 15: three in a general programme leading to higher education and 12 in the vocational study programme. The latter is known as the ‘2+2 model’, comprising two years in school and two years of apprenticeship. Students can also go from the apprenticeship system to complete a general academic course, extending their schooling to a third year and enabling them to access higher education upon completion (Markussen, Frøseth, & Sandberg, 2011). According to national statistics, 73% of young people in Norway complete upper secondary school; this includes 86% of those from the general programmes but only 59% of those from the vocational strand (Statistics Norway, 2016). There is evidence that those who are successful at school come primarily from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Falch & Nyhus, 2011; Markussen, 2014; Sletten & Hyggen, 2013; Markussen, Frøseth, Lødding, & Sandberg, 2008). This factor influences their success at school in terms of engagement and grades, in turn influencing their performance in upper secondary school (Markussen, Frøseth, & Sandberg, 2011).

In a recent review, De Witte, Cabus, Thyssen, Groot and van den Brink (2013, p. 18) noted that most studies seek to understand the causes behind dropping out by identifying the most salient ‘individual factors’ and ‘institutional factors’. Their theoretical underpinning is based on Rumberger (1983, 2004, 2011), who wrote: ‘Understanding why students drop out of school is the key to designing effective interventions to help solve this critical and costly problem’ (Rumberger, 2011, p. 143). In his extensive literature review, Rumberger (2011) identified two main predictors: individual and institutional. The former include school performance, attitudes and background; the latter include families, schools and communities.

To help these young people, we must understand both the dropout situation and the underlying process. However, as Rumberger writes, ‘[I]dentifying the causes of dropping out is extremely difficult’ (2011, p. 143). He emphasises that early school leaving is only the last phase in a cumulative process of

disengagement (Rumberger, 2004a). However, this does not mean that the search for the relevant factors should be abandoned, but rather that one should focus on the interplay between them. To illustrate the point, De Witte et al. referred to a US study:

[...] if a student is black or Hispanic and male, he is more likely to display negative attitudes towards education, perceive his teachers as having low expectations of him, and situate the locus of control over important things in his [school] life outside of himself. Thus, at least some minority students evidently risk ending up in a vicious circle. (2013, p. 23)

The study illustrates how the interplay between the minority students and their teachers influences their schooling, and underlines the importance of identifying the individual and institutional factors at play when some youths stay while others drop out. This interplay is determined within three institutional contexts: the family, the school and the community. While not suggesting a linear relationship between or within factors, this perspective implies that, taken together, these factors provide a measure of risk of dropping out that approximates a cause-effect relationship. This suggests that we look at youth dropout in terms of ‘an array of factors’, effectively marginalising them as outsiders or losers (Rumberger, 2011, p. 158). Rumberger noted a similar vicious circle, in which ethnicity, gender and attitudes towards education are considered more important in explaining why some US upper secondary school students drop out.

A perspective on dropping out that looks at risk factors but not the interplay between these creates a bi-dimensional individual/institutional framework for understanding how young people either graduate from upper secondary school or drop out. However, Brown and Rodriguez consider dropout from a different perspective as ‘disengagement with school [as] a socially mediated phenomenon’ (2009, p. 221). They see students’ schooling experiences as shaped by their disposition towards school and vice versa. Their analysis of how two informants (Angel and Ramon) ended up dropping out of school shifts our attention away from risk factors to how dropping out of school often involves complex interactional processes. They report discrepancies in these accounts—for instance, Angel believed that the school refused to provide him with a class schedule that reflected his learning abilities (2009, p. 228). Angel was ill-informed about his rights legal; with better information, he could have required educational measures to be adapted to his needs. As a result, Angel gradually became estranged from pedagogical activities and became increasingly convinced that the school did not want him there. After getting into serious trouble, he ended up dropping out permanently. The researchers found that the school had ignored Angel’s development, neglecting to provide him with the needed counselling, and before the end of the academic year, his supervisors had forgotten who he was. Fine (1991) adopted a similar perspective in her

ethnographic study of a high school. Her observations confirmed that it was difficult for students to air their point of view, and that the school regularly suppressed young voices and actively pushed students out of the system. Fine referred to this as ‘exporting dissidents’ (1991, p. 50). Brown and Rodriguez (2009) claimed that dropout occurs inside schools rather than outside, and that all elements of the school play a part. Like Fine, they warned against viewing dropout as bad behaviour or as a flaw in the system. Instead, they saw dropping out as a criticism of the school and noted the importance of exploring the interaction and mutual influence of individual and institutional factors. According to this view, being poorly motivated in school cannot be seen in isolation but develops through particular schooling experiences and domestic settings. Looking at this interaction acknowledges the importance of the risk factors described above for both graduation and dropout, but focuses primarily on interactions within a cultural and institutional framework.

Several researchers (e.g. Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Fine & Rosenberg, 1983; Fine, 1991; Alexander, Entwistle, & Kabbani, 2003; Jonker, 2006; Tanggaard, 2013) challenge how dropout is explained in terms of combinations of risk factors. Instead, they view dropout in relation to how people live their lives. This is in line with Dorn (1993) who argued that dropout is to be understood in the context of the norms and regulations that constitute societies. The school ethnographer Jonker wrote that she wanted to study dropout ‘[...] as a lived and, at times, barely voiced process of interactive and cumulative [self] exclusion’ (2006, p. 122). Tanggaard saw dropout as ‘basically created’, as some students ‘learn that school is not for them’ (2013, pp. 425, 427). In this way, dropout events are a result of socially mediated interactions connecting individuals in particular ways to their schools and their families, as well as to the larger community to which they belong. As the individual and the structural are intertwined, it is important to focus on the interaction to understand how particular dropout events develop. When youths’ are silenced at school, then, the analytical focus should be on understanding this particular silencing rather than on the factors that brought it about (Fine, 1991). In summary, while the first perspective seeks to identify precisely the individual and institutional factors involved in dropout, the second tries to identify how the dropout process develops as youths find themselves gradually outside the schooling situation.

The indirect method

Following youths over a ten-year period, this longitudinal qualitative study is now entering its fourth year, with data collected from qualitative ethnographic interviews and field notes. On completing each interview, the field notes are written up, detailing observations during the interview, as well as what happened before and after. All interviews are transcribed and coded in Nvivo,

along with the notes. During the first round in the first year, 71 youths were interviewed: 40 from vocational upper secondary school and 31 from the welfare system, all aged 16–21. All those recruited were at risk of dropout or had already experienced it. For present purposes, we concentrate on those recruited from the welfare system, who had already dropped out. These participants had been interviewed twice or three times, so providing at least two accounts of their story. All interviews were transcribed; those referred to here were translated into English.

To study dropout as a socially mediated phenomenon, we need to consider how young people end up living lives that force some of them out of school. As Jonker (2006) noted, our schooling is intimately connected to who we are and who we become. School may make us, but for some, ‘schooling apparently also hurts’ (p. 123). But how do we study dropout if it ‘occurs and is created on the “shop-floor” in school’, as Tanggaard (2013, p. 427) puts it? By implication, students’ own stories become central to this inquiry. However, young people will tell different stories to different audiences. Jonker (2006) compared her interviews with ‘photographic snapshots’ (p. 123) that at best capture moments of these young people’s lives.

To resist projecting researchers’ terminology onto informants’ experiences, we have adopted the *indirect approach* described by Moshuus and Eide (2016), in which informal interviews begin as small talk about what informants are currently doing. This is based on ethnographic interviewing (Spradley, 1979), engaging in conversations where both questions and answers ideally develop out of informants’ context. In this way, interviewers can use these interactions to initiate further dialogue that focuses on the unique personal experiences of each informant. In a way, this resembles what Tanggaard (2013) characterised as *voice research*, as we also try to capture snapshots of the words and terminology of interviewees. In so doing, we sought to enable vulnerable youth to assign meaning to their life course over time. As an example from the present study, when asked if she had any hobbies, one informant responded smilingly that she loved dogs. Following up on this interest, the conversation led the informant to reveal a tattoo that included the name of a neighbour’s now deceased dog. From there, a dialogue developed in which, rather than responding to inquiries, the informant became a storyteller who proceeded to tell of her love for animals and of her loneliness and lack of human contact. In a story that also encompassed school failures and therapy sessions, we can see an example of *happenstance*—something unforeseen that moves the research situation from an exchange between interviewer and informant to something more personal (Moshuus & Eide, 2016, pp. 4ff), describing dropping out of school in a manner less determined by the researchers’ terminology.

In each interview, we pursued similar strategies, seeking follow-up responses that would allow informants the space to tell their own stories. Before commencing each interview, an initial informal phase initiated conversation

about day-to-day events, and comments made by the informants would help us in beginning the interview to link it to relevant particulars. The success of this approach varied from interview to interview, with no means of validating that the interviews revealed each informant's relation to their schooling any more comprehensively than might be achieved by introducing our research agenda in some prefabricated terminology (cf. Brinkman & Kvale, 2015). However, by approaching informants conversationally, where our agenda is present only indirectly, we could introduce a level of interpretative complexity that enriches interpretation of the informants' possible meanings and perceptions of schooling—and, perhaps more importantly, their ways of framing their lack of schooling.

Analysis of the data involved three steps (Brinkmann & Kvale 2015). First, the field notes were read to gain an overview of participants and so determine who fulfilled the criteria. The field notes and interview transcripts were then read to mark and code passages of relevance to the research question. In the third and final round, the coded passages were read again, this time going deeper into the text in search of the individual's voice. We have omitted those who did not spend their childhood in Norway, as they would be unable to describe experiences from primary school there.² As the indirect approach gave the informants freedom to choose what stories they wanted to tell, some did not include descriptions of childhood or school, and these have also been removed. This left us with nine informants and 18 associated interviews and field notes. The analysis made us aware of the importance of the categories *dropping out*, *life in school* and *life at home* as recurring topics in the stories we heard, and these categories informed the analysis that follows.

All interviewees were recruited indirectly through third parties such as their school or the Welfare office. Each was provided with written information about the project as approved by the NSD (Norwegian National Research Centre for Data),³ and the informants understood that they could at any time cease to participate.

Youths' stories of dropping out

In addressing our research question, we emphasise the young people's narratives, citing dialogues that illustrate reasoning about dropping out. These stories exhibited several similarities in terms of challenges the young people had to overcome or failed to overcome. To look at longer narratives, we draw mainly on dialogues with Kirsten. Kirsten was in her early twenties when we first met her at the welfare office. She had just moved away from home, and was planning to start school again. She had grown up in a close-knit family, but had always struggled in one way or another at school. We introduce other informants where necessary to augment Kirsten's narrative. The following selected

verbatim stories relate to common themes in the literature, referring to dropout, participation at school and participation at home.

Dropping out

When introducing how they came to drop out, informants would refer to particular events and incidents, often followed by an explanation of a certain episode or problem. This might relate to problems with their apprenticeship placement or failing an exam.

Meeting Kirsten at the National Social Welfare office (NAV), she referred to her experiences attending the health and social work strand in school. The interviewer followed her lead and asked her to expand on that experience. This led to the following reflections on her apprenticeship placement.

I: So you completed both years [at school]?

K: Yes, I completed both years. The first went terribly, the second quite well. I got fives and sixes [six being the highest possible mark] and—that is, as my year result—and hardly any absences. The first year was nearly all absence. So, really, I was supposed to continue. And I decided to take an apprenticeship placement, and it was a terrible time to take a placement because the way these apprenticeship contracts are now, they are stupid.

I: Oh?

K: Yes, it is nearly impossible to get an apprenticeship. At least where I live.

I: No.

K: So—and there was also something about my body because I have [name of illness]...[describing her illness]... Yes, yes, but it is going well as long as you do not go around carrying heavy people and—

I: And you do that in a job like this?

K: Yes, that's right. So, that didn't work.

Kirsten said she dropped out of school because no apprenticeship placement was available, altering her social status from student to school leaver. However, as this section demonstrates, her narration revealed paradoxes and inconsistencies. Kirsten applied for a placement requiring her to do heavy lifting, yet she had a health condition that would not allow her to perform such tasks. This meant that she could not have coped physically with this apprenticeship placement. Kirsten also told us that her academic performance was initially very poor before becoming quite the opposite. Initially, she also had very poor attendance but ended up with almost no absences at all. This suggests that she would probably have had difficulty in securing a placement, as attendance is of particular importance. Regardless of these issues, however, she referred to the system and difficulties in getting a placement in her home town as the only problems.

Kirsten was not unique in this regard. Quite a few of the informants said they did not complete their schooling because they had failed to secure a placement or had quit, or because they had struggled, for instance, with older colleagues. Emil told the interviewer that, during his last year of schooling, he was forced to

change from one short-term practice position to another. These short practice placements are offered in the first years of schooling to prepare students for their apprenticeship placement. However, the new placement proved to be a positive experience, and Emil developed a good relationship with his employer:

E: [...] I enjoyed being there a lot because [the woman] who was the boss was very nice. Second, I learned ten times more than I learned when I was at the placement in a company that actually worked in the field. I learned more about the products, and I learned more about tiling because in the company, the only thing I did was to put bricks in a chimney and chisel a concrete floor. The rest of the time, I tidied their storage area, swept, and so on. That is what I did. [...]

E: Yes, and then I decided, when I started there, to attend the general strand at [name] Upper Secondary School. So then I started there.

In other words, while his first placement had been a disaster, Emil was very happy with his second placement. Although not a typical company in his chosen field, he still learned a lot. However, he also said that after having finished, he decided not to apply for an apprenticeship but to continue at school, dropping further vocational training. This again was a paradox; although successful during his placement, Emil still did not want to follow up by applying for an apprenticeship and qualifying in the course of two years. Instead, he wanted to apply for the general academic course, enabling him to apply for higher education. This was a very tough and theoretical year that the majority fail and extended his timeline for qualification for a job to at least four years. Having struggled with theory earlier at school, it seemed paradoxical for him to choose this path.

Like Kirsten, Per dropped out of school because he could not find an apprenticeship placement:

No, I was supposed to apply for an apprenticeship placement, and I couldn't find any apprenticeship. No one wanted to take me in.

When we met Per, he was waiting to get back to school and start a different vocational strand. He said he was on the lookout for job opportunities until school started. Later, he told the interviewer that 'Down here, [work opportunities] are very bad. There are many who struggle to find jobs'. Per's dialogue reveals paradoxical elements similar to Emil's. Just as Emil was content with his short-term placement and decided to stay at school rather than applying for an apprenticeship, Per decided to continue school, although he wanted to obtain work experience. Additionally, he spent his time applying for temporary jobs, knowing he would not get any.

Most informants told us they struggled while at school; many of them failed exams or did not complete one or more subjects. When we met Kirsten for her second interview, she was back at school for the second time, pursuing the

general academic course and hoping to take the exams that would fulfil her academic dreams. After Kirsten talked about her mathematics teacher, the interviewer followed up by asking how this subject was going.

K: Really horrible—failing.

I: Are you certain?

K: I am quite certain. I haven't passed a single test. We are having a whole-day test tomorrow. [...] If they give me multiplication and things like that, then I have to think about it for a while because the numbers circle around and around [in my head]. They were supposed to check me for dyscalculia; then, I could—I wouldn't get an exemption for that [maths] no matter what, because if I got an exemption, it wouldn't matter to the University College, because I have to have a mark in the subject. I found out today that I could have gotten into the University College if I had been exempt from Maths. Now, it is too late, obviously.

Kirsten knew she was struggling with mathematics. So far, the tests had not gone well, which was not encouraging in terms of the coming exam. Additionally, she was frustrated because of how she felt the school had handled this. Going to university was a dream, and this problem would make it difficult to achieve that dream. Then, it was upsetting to find that the school could have helped but chose not to, cancelling the dyscalculia testing. This meant that, once again, she would probably experience a change of status from student to dropout; once again, there might be a change of plan. Kirsten was already creating a new plan by attempting to get an apprenticeship placement. This time, she hoped she would work with clients who did not need lifting.

These stories illustrate how participants offered a singular explanation for why they dropped out of school. Although the interviewers did not in the first place ask them specifically about this, some event was commonly presented as an explanation for dropping out of school. The explanation usually related to problems with apprenticeship placements or failing exams (most often in mathematics). They did not point to other factors in or outside school, and they did not mention previous difficulties as a direct cause.

Life at school

Some informants talked more than others about struggling at school, about being bullied or having difficult relationships, psychiatric problems or learning difficulties. However, they all talked in particular about difficulties in passing or managing mathematics. It was interesting how this subject came to the fore when discussing their experiences and feelings, as in the case of Bernt:

I struggle with Maths. So, when for example I get a sheet of paper with math tasks, the numbers just fly around in my head straight away, and I can feel a build-up and a lump in my stomach. And it moves further and further up, and it really feels like it is going to burst, and I feel rage inside.

Bernt's frustrations with mathematics appeared to have reached an emotional level, becoming an obstacle to his learning capabilities. As described above, Kirsten described mathematics in a similar way when she talked about dropping out for a second time, saying that found it the most difficult school subject.

Among other aspects of school that came up in the interviews, nearly half of the informants volunteered information about being bullied by other students or even by teachers. One described being bullied because of his sexual preferences, something he claimed the school did nothing about. Others described physical abuse; for example, Yngvar told us the following:

When I went to primary school, I was beaten up several times a week. And if, for example, I was going to read aloud in class [...], I stuttered a lot and didn't quite manage to read the words. It was all jumbled. So, then I read a lot incorrectly and slowly, and people often laughed at me. And what was worse, the teacher in that class didn't stop them when they laughed at me.

Yngvar's peers physically beat him, and the teacher made this violent and traumatising experience worse by not interfering. School was not a place where he felt safe; on the contrary, the teachers made him read and stutter, despite documented reading difficulties, making way for further peer bullying and probably adding to his learning difficulties:

I mean, if not, if the school or the teachers had been better at forcefully stopping the bullying at primary school, then I don't think I would have struggled so much with the dyslexia.

Kirsten never told us she was being bullied. However, listening to what she told us, it became apparent that she experienced episodes of feeling outside from the peer group:

And I didn't fit in well in the class. [...] We [she and the other students] went together in the same class for twelve years, no, seven years, until we were twelve. And we quarrelled, and we fought, and we—very few understood why Kirsten was the way Kirsten was. [...] I do not know why, but I was very different. And it meant that it was difficult to sit in class with the others because everything you did was observed. Because you did something without understanding why, people thought what you did was strange. Then, you did something that actually was strange. And, now, I can understand it a bit better. [...] I can't manage. It is not possible for me to behave exactly the way I should. I do behave properly, and I am nice, but there is always something or other that is different.

At first, Kirsten seemed not to have understood what was happening. Later, she did understand but found it difficult to pinpoint exactly what made her different from the others. In the second interview, she talked more about her early childhood, how from a very early pre-school age she was always different, and how the only kids she could play with, or be with were the ones on the fringe of

the local community. Other social settings were, as she described it, closed to her. We can guess that she knew that, to fit in, she had to change how she was, but something in her made her unwilling to do so. What started out as a social role forced upon her by her peers, and later by her teachers, seems to have become a much more ambiguous position. She resisted adapting to expectations, and as she approached adulthood, her resistance may eventually have become a role of her own choosing.

Kirsten felt like an outsider in class. Her relationships with other students were difficult, but so were her relationships with her teachers. Later in her dialogue about mathematics and how she felt teachers failed to push her enough, she described how she felt her teachers perceived her:

K: It was the psychological issues and everything they thought had happened. Or if I smoked or things like that, they thought I was doing drugs. And I have never [taken drugs]. I took these drug tests many times because of a teacher nagging about it, and nothing ever showed. So, they should have taken the hint that I wasn't doing it, but it didn't help. I just had to grit my teeth and...

I: Why do you think they labelled you like this?

K: Because they knew. Well, they thought that I was bad influence. In primary school, I was already called a bad influence.

This shows not only that Kirsten was ostracised from the pupils' fellowship but that the teachers also viewed her as different and as a 'bad influence'. She would have preferred her teachers challenging her to perform better in school, particularly to help her improve in mathematics. Instead, she felt they nagged her about inconsequential matters related to her marginal social position. The interviewer followed this up to determine whether there were really no teachers who took an interest in her, to which she replied: 'Yes, there was one. It went very well, until he was [warned by the other members of staff]. I think he was told to stay away after a while'.

The other informants rarely said this much about their relationships with their teachers, tending instead to speak indirectly about the absence of such relationships. When Kristian talked about a good teacher he remembered, the one who came to mind was a female teacher who taught him for six months in eighth grade before taking maternity leave: 'She tried to help me a little bit'.

The young people who had earlier specified the event that led to their exit now described several challenges they had encountered in school from early childhood. Most described episodes of being bullied or ostracized, similar to those above, and of struggling alone, with no one to help them, perhaps because they had not formed relationships with their teachers or with other pupils. Many of them also found school challenging because of learning difficulties. However, these were offered as stories about life at school rather than to explain why they had dropped out; in fact, most were very careful not to blame a situation or person in this regard.

Life at home

Support at home was rarely touched upon directly in the interviews. Indirectly, there seemed to be a lack of parental involvement, sometimes because of parents' drug abuse or illness. Kirsten was one of those who talked at length about family and had close relations with both parents and her remaining grandparents. Once, when talking about her difficulty with mathematics, she described her father as clever—*'the cleverest person I know'*—but when it came to subjects like mathematics, he was of no help.

K: [...] I have never had—I have never had any challenges at school. It has often been too boring, a bit tame and not very challenging. And then, I have done badly because I haven't bothered to work hard for something that is very easy. But, with maths, then, I struggle so much that I try as hard as I can and still nothing comes of it.

I: You don't have anybody that can help you a bit with the mathematics at home?

K: No, nobody. My brother is dyscalculic. My father can't do maths, although he knows a little. My mum knows absolutely nothing. My grandmother knew some maths before. They have boasted so much about my grandmother's knowledge of maths, but it is primary school maths [that she knows]. However, she is still the cleverest one [in maths].

The cleverest person in the family—the one they all said could help Kirsten—was her grandmother. However, even the best mathematician in the family was of no use to Kirsten in upper secondary school; wanting to be involved was not enough. While the others did not offer similar examples, there is reason to believe that few if any of them had parents that could help them with their schooling because the parents lacked schooling themselves, or their life situation was so difficult that it would have been hard for them. For that reason, these young people had to face their educational challenges alone.

The informants were generally sensitive when they talked about their parents, probably because they did not wish to expose them. However, they disclosed indirectly that these relationships could be challenging. For instance, Lavrans talked about spending every second weekend throughout childhood with his father, not really understanding why this was difficult until later:

Yes. My dad—my real dad—he is very close to being an alcoholic, and he has made a habit of disappointing me and my sisters by often promising things he couldn't deliver.

Lavrans now understood that his father's peculiar behaviour was because of his struggles with alcohol, making him unstable and unable to keep his promises.

All informants touched on stories about family life, revealing that nearly all of them lived with only one parent or with divorced parents, switching between them. Some had no contact with the other parent, and this often coincided with stories of the parent's drug or alcohol abuse. In many cases, one or both parents

were living on welfare. During the first interview, Kirsten mentioned that her father was on welfare:

K: My dad, he is on welfare.

I: I see.

K: He goes on [explain what kind of welfare support], but it is because of—he is rheumatic of some kind of thing that I can't remember, something called [naming a back problem]. Or I thought it was [back problem] all the time, but it wasn't. It was something else that was actually terribly bad. It took twenty years to find out what it was.

The young people were careful about how they described their parents. However, their stories indicated that nearly all of them were from single-parent families. Like Kirsten, more than half of the informants had one or both parents on welfare at the time of interview. We were told about serious illnesses, injuries following accidents, and drug or alcohol abuse, which made it impossible for parents to work, confining them to a lower income. Many of the young people described a lack of support, either because of difficulties at home or because they just did not know how to manoeuvre within the educational system. This meant that many of them had to handle school on their own, without active parental involvement or support.

The complexity of dropping out

How do young people talk about dropping out of school when you don't ask them directly? The analysis presented here adopts a socially mediated approach to studying dropout, devoting particular attention to how informants present their own stories. While the analysis corroborates knowledge developed through other studies of dropout, the complexities of the stories we heard also brought new issues to light.

As we have seen, dropping out was, for example, attributed to not getting an apprenticeship placement or failing an exam. At the same time, we were told about challenges like bullying, learning difficulties, lack of relationships and a sense of being marginalised. At home, we were told, they had parents who struggled, often on welfare and living in single-parent families. They talked about parents' difficulties with substance abuse, excessive intake of alcohol, and serious medical conditions. Kirsten told us how she was unable to get help with her maths. Similarly, we learned how informants generally received little academic support from their families to help them through their schooling.

In explaining why they dropped out, our informants applied cause-and-effect reasoning, referring to specific events or incidents such as failing an exam or not getting an apprenticeship to account for why they abandoned their schooling. Kirsten and Per are among the largest group, failing to complete secondary

education because of a lack of apprenticeship placements—a structural impediment that is beyond their control. Their reasoning is reflected in key findings on dropout in upper secondary school in both national and international research (Rumberger, 2011; Markussen et al., 2008; Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2014, 2015). National research shows that every fifth youth who fails to complete the programme within the assigned five years has failed to pass one or more exams (Markussen et al., 2008; Markussen, 2014). Markussen reported that background, level of knowledge and skills when starting upper secondary school, engagement at school, and educational context (2014, p. 7) are key factors when youth drop out. Similarly, the informants' own stories confirm that they come from families that struggle on many accounts, and that they struggle at school both in terms of the necessary academic results and their sense of fitting in.

However, their stories also reveal what may seem like inconsistencies or discrepancies, as in the case of Emil, who enjoyed his placement but decided not to continue his vocational schooling and changed to a more theoretical strand, which meant further years of education before getting a job. Similarly, Kirsten prepared for a placement that her health made her unfit for and ultimately dropped out because there were not enough placements for all those who applied. Why did Emil use the positive placement experience to continue for a third year at school—an academic challenge he was not particularly prepared for? Why did Kirsten ignore her own health issues when applying for a placement?

As mentioned earlier, Brown and Rodriguez (2009) analysed how Angel and Ramon ended up dropping out of school. They too were at risk in terms of known individual and institutional factors. Angel's tragic trajectory resonates disturbingly with developments we can identify in Kirsten's story during the time we have followed her. When we first met, she was preparing for a placement for which she was ill equipped. Her story does not mention any kind of counselling in this respect. When next we talked, she was struggling to prepare for her final mathematics exams, which she was told she had to pass to continue to University level. In fact, it seems she could have done so without passing that exam, but when she did find out, it was too late. So, why was she not informed in time? We expect she was facing yet another period out of school. She also told us how the school should have had her checked for dyscalculia but never did. And we heard the story of a young girl who felt ignored by the teaching staff throughout her schooling and also felt increasingly left out of the student community as someone who did not fit in. A lack of support at home only added to the challenges at school. Looking at Kirsten's narratives, then, it is apparent that as well as identifying risk (individual and institutional), it is also important to identify processes of *progressive disengagement* (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009, p. 238) if one is to understand what is going on.

It is worth noting that the discrepancy in Emil's story is quite different. While Kirsten's was of a kind that would lead her to abandon her schooling career, his relates to measures taken to stay in school, which failed to help him. So, why did he do it? Why did he choose another year at school rather than trying to get a placement? According to Jonker, 'Schooling, [...] is part of the complex process of shaping and reshaping the self' (2006, p. 123). In a sense, school has become a place where we define who we are. For some, school is the gateway to society. However, schooling may also hurt; it may break you and make you feel out of options for entering society. It is quite possible that this 'reshaping of the self' is what moved Emil to do as he did. His second placement was good, but his first was not. Did that mixed experience help him to realise the importance of further education before returning to the labour market? Per also returned to school, although less because he wanted to than because 'no one wanted me', as he said, referring to employers offering placements.

While several of the stories here reveal no such discrepancies, all refer to how schooling shapes experience. Bernt told us how he struggled with maths, saying that 'I feel a rage inside'. Yngvar recounted how he was bullied by his peers only to discover that his teachers condoned what was going on. Looking at these young people from an individual/institutional risk perspective, we seem to find an accumulating 'array of factors' (Rumberger, 2011) at work. This further suggests that those who drop out do so because of a vicious circle identified internationally, where ethnicity, gender and attitudes to education combine to push some students out of school. However, their stories reveal a complexity in how their different experiences create their individual paths out of school. Our informants often started by telling us how they dropped out because of an exam in maths or lack of an apprenticeship placement. The events were part of the narratives they chose to tell. As their stories developed, the events did not reveal arrays of risk factors but made us aware of their particular struggle to succeed. In this sense, the lack of an apprenticeship became the result (or symptom) of what had transpired in their own lives (Alexander, Entwistle, & Kabbani, 2003). Kirsten struggled to form relationships with teachers and students, and she was excluded and struggled in certain subjects, but her story also tells us that she felt that her school never helped her with those struggles. In that sense, Kirsten's story was not one of accumulated risk factors but of ongoing disengagement. Like Brown and Rodriguez's (2009) informants Angel and Ramon, Kirsten's trajectory was ignored; she was relegated to the outside and in that way silenced (Fine, 1991).

In studying the socially mediated process of gradual disengagement, Brown and Rodriguez (2009) followed Angel and Roman only at school. However, when telling us about her school experiences, Kirsten referred to her father as the cleverest person she knew, but he still could not help her with her maths. No one in her extended family or network could help her, she said, and others talked about even more difficult situations outside school. Lavrans, for instance, told us

about the struggle he faced from an early age because of his father's drinking while, at the same time, his stepfather gave him a hard time at home. To grasp the complexity of dropping out as socially mediated, then, we must include the socially mediated processes beyond school.

Conclusion: From risk identification to progressive disengagement

At the outset, we asked *How do young people's stories explain what led to dropping out of school?* The stories they told offered two answers. First, they offered simple reasons, pointing to particular incidents; second, as they went on, complexities emerged as they framed these incidents within much larger narratives, including experiences both inside and outside school. That first answer may reflect their familiarity with language that reflects dominant labelling practices in relation to dropping out (cf. Becker, 1963). If so, what does the second answer tell us? In their longer stories, as they started to use their own words, we learned paradoxically about complex processes that they share with many others in similar situations. In other words, their first answer—that dropping out appeared to be an individual trajectory that led them out of school as they accumulated risks—proves to be only a partial picture. Telling us that they dropped out because they expected to fail their exam or failed to get an apprenticeship placement makes it their failure alone. However, when they tell us about their teachers, how they labelled them and how they failed to help them, we see their earlier account within a larger picture. And when they add their family and larger network to the story, what began as an isolated individual struggle is better understood as a gradual process, where the individual young person interacts in different arenas over time. This confirms that the influence of institutional frameworks on educational progress is greater than their ability to make good choices. As we have seen from these stories, parents do not have what it takes to support their children when they struggle at school—even if they want to—because they do not understand the language of school.

Clearly, it is necessary to identify both individual and institutional factors that put young people at risk of dropping out. However, this is not the whole picture. To better understand their destiny, we need to learn from young people's own stories—told in their own words—to understand how these risk factors play out in their social relations, both in and out of school, leading to their gradual disengagement from education and ultimately to dropout.

About the author

Mette Bunting is Professor of Educational Science in the Department of Educational Science at the University College of Southeast Norway. With Geir H. Moshuus, she leads the research project *Youth, Completion and Dropout in Telemark*. Her interests are youth and dropout, learning strategies, leadership and inclusive education.

Geir H Moshuus is Associate Professor of Social Anthropology at the University College of Southeast Norway. With Mette Bunting, he leads the research project *Youth, Completion and Dropout in Telemark*. His current interests are youth research, marginality, drug consumption and subculture in modern society.

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² To include these stories would extend to analytical discussion beyond the scope of those pursued here.

³ NSD is the Data Protection Official for Research for all Norwegian universities and university colleges, as well as for several hospitals and research institutes.