

Student dropout in upper secondary education in Norway: A challenge to the principles of the welfare state?

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Abstract

This article presents a review of extant research on student dropout in Norway, originally undertaken as part of a systematic review. The article contextualizes the foundational principle of equality as championed by the welfare state and identifies the significance of dropout in upper secondary education in Norway. The article then assesses whether dropout has been sufficiently addressed, by exploring dropout measures that have been implemented and evaluated. It is argued that although equality of access to upper secondary education has been improved, the enduring significance of student dropout reveals concealed educational inequalities of outcomes in a social democratic 'welfare state'.

Keywords: dropout; upper secondary education; Nordic welfare model; review of research; evaluation studies

Introduction

Paralleling the situation in other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, student dropout from upper secondary education and training in Norway constitutes a significant policy challenge (OECD, 2016). The majority of research on this issue in Norway has analysed student/registry data (see e.g. Eielsen *et al.*, 2013; Huitfeldt *et al.*, 2016; Markussen *et al.*, 2008; Støren *et al.*, 2007), but this research alone cannot tell us which measures are the most effective or inform practitioners and policymakers about how best to invest their time and resources in tackling this issue. Researchers and policy advisors note that there is a relative lack of dropout measures in the Norwegian context that have been systematically evaluated by methodologically rigorous research designs such as randomized controlled trials (RCTs) (e.g. Eielsen *et al.*, 2013; Wollscheid & Noonan, 2012).

Recognizing this paucity of methodologically sound evaluation studies and amidst increased public scrutiny and pressure to reduce dropout, the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research asked the Knowledge Centre for Education to summarize international research in a systematic review on effective dropout measures in upper secondary education (Lillejord *et al.*, 2015). By commissioning a systematic review of effective dropout measures implemented and evaluated in other contexts, the commissioner signalled an intention to transfer these measures to the Norwegian context and recognized that much can be learned from elsewhere. Although education systems and cultures vary between Norway and other countries – with varying structures, organizations, and qualification requirements for enrolment in upper secondary education and for its successful completion – there are noticeable cross-national

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similarities when examining educational practices and expectations as well as the main causes of dropout. A review of 13 different OECD countries (Lamb *et al.*, 2010) concluded that similar patterns can be identified when explaining dropout in upper secondary education in the individual countries, including variables relating to previous school performance, the social and demographic background of the students and a process of social reproduction of inequalities across generations.

Nevertheless, the relevant studies identified for the Knowledge Centre for Education's systematic review originated exclusively from other countries – primarily from the United States (Lillejord *et al.*, 2015). As the dropout measures were implemented and evaluated elsewhere, there is no guarantee that they will produce the same effects in Norway. Hence, the systematic review was introduced with a chapter on the extant research on dropout in upper secondary education in the Norwegian context (Lillejord *et al.*, 2015: chap. 1). This was intended to help policymakers understand how effective dropout measures from other contexts might be implemented and/or tailored so as to achieve their intended effects in Norway (e.g. by benefiting from readily available resources and strategies to deal with dropout in Norway). The current article builds upon this introductory chapter to the systematic review by focusing specifically on the Norwegian context rather than on the international research identified in the main part of that systematic review.

The article will first provide background on the process of systematic reviewing and the systematic review that this article builds upon. It will then contextualize the development of the Nordic welfare model and its impact upon the Norwegian education system, before assessing the significance of dropout in upper secondary education in Norway. Norway is often seen as a bastion of welfare and the promoter of an egalitarian society, yet the gap in retention rates between particular groups of students exposes concealed inequalities in the Norwegian education system. As the success of welfare support can be measured by the extent to which the state implements educational measures that mitigate the relationship between social background factors and educational outcomes (Peter *et al.*, 2010), the article will then review evaluations of dropout measures in the Norwegian context. It will be shown that the measures have generally failed to reduce dropout rates, which – as in other contexts – significantly affect certain groups more than others, despite the relatively strong position of social democratic welfare principles in Norwegian education policymaking. Although equality of access has been improved following the implementation of Reform 94 in 1994, with all who complete compulsory education in Norway now guaranteed a place in upper secondary education, it is argued that the dropout rates reveal the enduring significance of educational inequalities of *outcomes* (i.e. measured as dropout in this article). In making this argument, the article addresses the concern that welfare-building and the education sector are usually considered in isolation from each other in research (Antikainen, 2006; Arnesen and Lundahl, 2006; Peter *et al.*, 2010). Although the mismatch between welfare-state principles and high dropout rates has been investigated in the Norwegian context (e.g. Buland and Mathiesen, 2014; Markussen *et al.*, 2011), cost–benefit analyses and economic considerations of dropout have arguably taken on a more prominent role (e.g. Eielsen *et al.*, 2013; Falch *et al.*, 2009, 2010; Huitfeldt *et al.*, 2016).

The value (and limitations) of systematic reviews

As the current article has emerged from a systematic review, it is instructive to begin by explaining the aim and procedure of systematic reviewing. While many factors might be of interest in relation to an issue such as student dropout, the aim of a systematic review is to identify the most *relevant* literature – i.e. research that can answer the review's particular scope. This is

achieved through a transparent and replicable process of documenting comprehensive search strategies and generating objective criteria for selecting studies to be included in the review. This contrasts with a traditional literature review, in which a relative lack of accountability as to how the literature was identified and selected often leaves the reader uninformed on whether the authors' various decisions were appropriate and/or applied consistently. For instance, the authors may have failed to identify some relevant studies as they did not provide comprehensive enough searches, or possibly excluded studies deliberately where they contradicted their own arguments. A literature review may also lack the rigorous assessment of methodological quality of included studies and the synthesis of the overall body of evidence that often accompany systematic reviews (Brown, 2013; Gough *et al.*, 2012; Petticrew and Roberts, 2006).

Concerns have been voiced over the adaptation of systematic reviews to an increasing range of fields beyond health research – the field in which it became established. It has been argued (e.g. Biesta, 2007; MacLure, 2005; see also Major and Savin-Baden, 2010) that the inroads made by systematic reviews into the field of educational research might not be appropriate due to certain fundamental differences from health research, and particularly from the subfield of epidemiology. These critiques take particular aim at the 'what works' paradigm of effectiveness reviews and the inclusion mainly of quantitative cause-and-effect experiments, such as RCTs. Although this selection criterion may be justified on the grounds that other factors need to be controlled for when establishing the effects of *physical/clinical* interventions such as drug trials, these critics argue that the classroom is a fundamentally different setting consisting of *symbolically* mediated interactions between teachers and students. Hence, to capture these dynamic interactions, educational research needs to accommodate the more in-depth insights into teaching and learning that can be gleaned from other types of study, and especially qualitative studies.

As the scope of the systematic review that this article builds upon was intervention/evaluation studies of measures with a *documented effect* on dropout in upper secondary education (Lillejord *et al.*, 2015), it presupposed an aggregative synthesis (Gough *et al.*, 2012) of 'adding up' multiple studies with similar focuses to test a preconceived idea (e.g. of the effectiveness of dropout measures). However, the commissioner also requested that studies should ideally describe, in as much detail as possible, how the interventions were designed and implemented to produce this effect. This was more in line with Gough *et al.*'s (2012) configurative synthesis, which involved ordering (or configuring) insights from studies thematically to generate understanding or to explore (rather than test) approaches to an issue (i.e. how an effective dropout measure should be implemented) (Lillejord *et al.*, 2015). Adopting this approach hopefully contributes towards addressing some of the above criticism of effectiveness reviews in education. Recently published guidance on synthesis methods (Booth *et al.*, 2016) argues that the discussion sections of quantitative study reports such as RCTs, when offering sufficient textual elaboration and nuance, may provide reviewers with 'qualitative' material.

When searching for relevant studies in the Knowledge Centre for Education's systematic review (Lillejord *et al.*, 2015), the search terms for a Campbell systematic review on evaluation studies of dropout measures from 1985 to 2010 (Wilson *et al.*, 2011) were adopted to search for studies between 2010 and 2014. In addition to hand searches, seven electronic databases were searched (see Appendix). In total 26 studies were included – all originating from contexts other than Norway (Lillejord *et al.*, 2015). With the configurative aim of advancing understanding as to how dropout measures from other contexts can be implemented or tailored to achieve the same effects in Norway, the introductory chapter to the systematic review on the Norwegian context (*ibid.*: chap. 1) was conceived – as considered in more detail below.

The Nordic welfare model's impact upon the Norwegian education system

The issue of dropout in upper secondary education in Norway needs to be contextualized historically. It is crucial to understand how the Nordic welfare model has assumed an integral role in the Norwegian education sector, building upon social democratic principles that everyone, regardless of background, should be part of a well-functioning society. Through the re-distribution of taxpayers' money, the post-Second World War Norwegian state implemented a universal safety net with welfare benefits and support measures safeguarding citizens against social exclusion. A wide range of social rights have been implemented to mitigate socio-economic inequalities based on gender, class, 'race', ethnicity, or other variables. As such, measures relating to means-tested assistance, modest economic transfers, private healthcare, insurance cover and private education – as associated with states advocating a more liberal tradition of 'welfare' such as the USA, the UK and Australia – have been downplayed (Antikainen, 2006; Arnesen and Lundahl, 2006; Esping-Andersen, 1996; Markussen *et al.*, 2011). Although a knowledge-based economy has also been introduced in Nordic countries in the wake of the neo-liberal wave shaping the world since the 1980s (Benner, 2003; Lappalainen *et al.*, 2013), the principles of the Nordic welfare model have, to a considerable extent, prevailed in Norwegian policymaking. Various indicators of inequalities show that Norwegian society is considered more egalitarian than many other industrialized societies (Reisel, 2013; see also Peter *et al.*, 2010).

In the education sector, free and equal access to inclusive education has historically been prioritized in Norway. Beginning in the 1920s, the realization of a common school for all became a steering principle (Markussen *et al.*, 2010). The publicly funded comprehensive school system reflects, perhaps most evidently, the influence of the Nordic welfare model on the Norwegian education system, as it has refrained from 'selecting, tracking or streaming students during their basic education until the age of 16' (Lie *et al.*, 2003: 8). These are processes which, in contrast, are often emphasized in other western contexts (Lamb *et al.*, 2010; OECD, 2016).

A desire to transcend traditional divides between the general academic upper secondary schools and vocational schools became evident with the development of a common upper secondary school in 1974. This meant that vocational education and training (VET) and general studies were clustered within the same school environment/campus. However, this did not prevent certain youths from being declined admission to an apprenticeship place in VET. With the introduction of Reform 94 in 1994, upper secondary education was therefore made a statutory right. Anyone who has completed compulsory education at primary and lower secondary school level in Norway is now entitled to an upper secondary education of, normally, a minimum of three years. In the application process, three choices of study programme can be listed and students are guaranteed admission to at least one of these (Markussen *et al.*, 2010: 253–4). As a consequence of this reform, almost 98 per cent of students who complete compulsory schooling in Norway enrol in upper secondary education immediately – usually the year they turn 16 years of age (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2014: 105).

The significance of dropout in Norway

Despite the integral role of the Nordic welfare model in providing educational access to upper secondary education, figures show that 27 per cent of the students who commenced their upper secondary education in 2010 did not complete their upper secondary education successfully within five years – i.e. had not within that time obtained a vocational/craft certificate or a diploma to study at university or another higher education institution. Although this is the lowest rate of dropout since the five-year statistic was first recorded (for the 1994 cohort), it remains to be seen whether this trend can be sustained. The percentage that fails to complete

successfully within five years has fluctuated around 30 per cent for the 1994–2009 cohorts (Statistics Norway, 2016).

Some policymakers, nevertheless, celebrate these figures as showing that, while only 30 per cent of students who started VET in 1991 completed their education, this had risen to close to 60 per cent for the 1994 and 1995 cohorts following the implementation of Reform 94 (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2006). As these figures are based on a few cohorts, Hansen and Mastekaasa (2010) have been less convinced of the longer-term importance of Reform 94 once other variables, such as wider economic trends and conjunctures in the labour market, have been controlled for. Hansen and Mastekaasa argue that because Reform 94 encouraged more people to choose VET and because there is a higher dropout rate from this track of studies than from general studies, the net result is a lower proportion of birth cohorts with completed upper secondary education compared with the years preceding Reform 94. The figures from Statistics Norway (2016) for the 2010 cohort show that the completion rate for VET after five years was only 58 per cent, while for general studies it was, in remarkable contrast, 86 per cent.

As VET tends to comprise students whose parents have obtained a lower level of education, a correlating factor is parents' educational level. While 88 per cent of students whose parents have completed more than four years of higher education (in Norway, a bachelor's and subsequent master's degree typically takes five years combined) complete upper secondary education successfully within five years, this applies to only 49 per cent of students whose parents have lower secondary school as their highest educational level (Statistics Norway, 2016). These numbers are sometimes ignored, however, as a student's grade point average (GPA) in lower secondary education has been demonstrated to be the most significant variable in explaining dropout in upper secondary education, a situation similar to that in other OECD contexts (Lamb *et al.*, 2010). Although a longitudinal study of 9,749 students in south-eastern Norway confirmed the importance of this variable, it was simultaneously shown that the GPA in lower secondary school is itself influenced by students' social background (Markussen *et al.*, 2008, 2011). The importance of social background arguably reflects a process of social reproduction, or how the value of education is communicated differently to children depending on parents' class positions. When the education system favours middle-class values, more working- than middle-class youths are likely to drop out (Boudon, 1974; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

Additionally, the dominant ethnic group in a society is often construed as the yardstick against which educational 'success' is measured (Ruth, 2010: 144), ignoring how first-generation migrants – especially those from non-western backgrounds – are more at risk of dropout (see e.g. Fekjær, 2006; Lødding, 1998, 2009). While approximately two out of three students among the majority population successfully complete upper secondary education after five years in Norway, this applies to about half of first-generation migrants from non-western countries (Markussen *et al.*, 2008; Statistics Norway, 2015). Another background factor is gender, as boys are more likely to choose VET study programmes and drop out than girls (Statistics Norway, 2016).

Evaluations of dropout measures in Norway

Above, the influence of various background variables on dropout in Norway has been shown. A strand of researchers claim that since students' background is such a strong predictor of dropout, dropout is an inevitable outcome for some students (see Markussen *et al.*, 2011 for a critical overview). I would, however, take issue with this deterministic view and draw upon Rumberger's insight that '[a]lthough schools cannot do anything about the demographic and social characteristics of their students, they can change their own practices that have a direct

bearing on whether students remain in school' (1995: 618). The question still remains as to whether dropout in upper secondary education has in fact been sufficiently dealt with – reflecting the extent to which the Norwegian welfare state has been intolerant to and sought to redress educational inequalities in outcomes as reflected by dropout rates.

Similar to the systematic search for international literature (Lillejord *et al.*, 2015: chap. 4), an overview of former evaluations of dropout measures implemented in Norway (*ibid.*, 2015: chap. 1) indicated that there is insufficient evidence in the extant literature to conclude with certainty which category of dropout measures is the most effective. Notwithstanding, Markussen (2010) has identified the following four categories of dropout measures that have been prioritized in Norwegian policymaking:

- Measures aimed at counselling and career guidance;
- Elements of practice in VET;
- Special needs education for youths at risk;
- Reforms and comprehensive intervention packages.

Based on recent developments, a fifth category might be added:

- Improved in-service training and education for adults responsible for students.

The five categories of dropout measures will be presented below with relevant examples. In identifying relevant examples/evidence, it was deemed inappropriate to replicate the more comprehensive search for international literature of the systematic review that this article builds upon (see Appendix). In particular, that search had adopted Wilson *et al.*'s (2011) search strategy and consisted of English-language terms that did not capture Norwegian-language literature. As such, the present author has conducted separate searches for this literature specifically for this article. In addition to checking the reference list of Markussen's (2010) relatively comprehensive literature review, searches from 2009 to July 2016 were conducted in order to sufficiently overlap with and update Markussen's (2010) review. This consisted of a Google Scholar search with a combination of Norwegian words to identify empirical evaluation studies/reports of measures targeting dropout in upper secondary education and/or associated risk factors (such as attendance, academic achievement and educational attainment). A manual search for studies in the table of contents of key Nordic education journals (*Nordic Studies in Education* and *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*) was also undertaken, enabling studies in comparable Nordic contexts to be considered insofar as they could throw further light on initiatives to reduce dropout in Norway. Due to the reported lack of robust evaluation studies in the Norwegian context – especially of the 'gold-standard' RCTs (Lillejord *et al.*, 2015) – it was deemed impractical to restrict the search by study design, and the selection of studies was informed by the principle of identifying the best available evidence (see Petticrew and Roberts, 2006).

Measures aimed at counselling and career guidance

In the first category of dropout measures in Norway, the provision of advice and tutoring to ensure that students make informed choices of study track and/or programme in upper secondary education is emphasized. It seems that students who fail to get their educational choices 'right', or who do not gain admission to their preferred choice of study programme, are more likely to drop out. It has been argued that VET study programmes, in particular, put more pressure on students to decide their profession at a relatively early stage of their lives (Hernes, 2010: 58–61).

The Knowledge Promotion Reform (*Kunnskapsløftet*) in 2006 included measures to strengthen the counselling service and career guidance. Two subjects were introduced with

the aim that students should make informed decisions. A subject on educational choice (*Utdanningsvalg*) was introduced in lower secondary school, aimed at helping students to make choices for upper secondary education. Concurrently, an in-depth study project (*Prosjekt til fordypning*) was introduced in all VET study programmes in the first and second year to enable students to test different subjects and observe how adults work in different professions. This has aimed to facilitate students' choice of subjects/courses in the following years of their education (Markussen, 2010: 213). However, the outcomes of initiatives relating to student choice are challenging to measure, and in the search for evidence there was a noticeable lack of studies documenting the isolated effects of these initiatives on dropout.

Elements of practice in VET

As some students do not feel they fit in with mainstream, theoretical classroom education, attempts have been made to make the theoretical instruction more relevant to professions that students are being trained for in VET. For example, foreign language words used in certain professions can be introduced during language classes (Hansen and Mastekaasa, 2010). For those who have already dropped out, moreover, it is realized that it is not necessarily beneficial to return them to the same theoretical-style classroom education that perhaps pushed them out of education in the first place (see e.g. Frostad *et al.*, 2015).

In 2007, an arrangement was introduced that offered students who demonstrated lower academic achievement a more practice-oriented training track qualifying them for a lower level Certificate of Practice (*Praksisbrev*). It was tested in three selected counties in Norway. Despite good intentions, one of the few reports based on qualitative interviews with teachers in VET (Skulberg and Sund, 2009) showed that many of the teachers were somewhat sceptical as to whether the practice-based schemes would increase the probability of students remaining in education. Yet, statistical evaluations suggest that the arrangement may, at the very least, increase the probability of securing a job opportunity compared with alternative arrangements for at-risk students (e.g. Markussen, 2014). Based on such assessments, the Certificate of Practice was recently made available on a national level (Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise, 2015).

Special needs education for youths at risk

As part of the Nordic welfare model, the incorporation of special needs education has historically been a typical feature (Antikainen, 2006). Special needs education initiatives were, for instance, in 2007 encouraged by the Karlsen Committee, which is responsible for addressing future challenges in VET. The committee argued that by mapping students' skills in various subjects already at primary school, measures could be designed and implemented to target their specific needs. In particular, it argued that early interventions could provide greater returns than measures implemented at a later stage as a last resort, when students are in danger of dropping out (Skulberg and Sund, 2009).

Researchers have argued that pedagogical differentiation has not been employed extensively enough, due to the inherent belief that everyone should be treated equally in Norway (Markussen *et al.*, 2011). However, we have recently witnessed an intensified prioritization of special needs education which, in principle, appears to be a development broadly consistent with Markussen *et al.*'s argument that it may be necessary to implement '*inequality of resources* in order to achieve *equality of results*' (2011: 243, emphasis in original). There is still uncertainty, however, as to whether special needs education initiatives have achieved their intended effects (Eielsen *et al.*, 2013; Huitfeldt *et al.*, 2016) and there is 'a need for more Nordic research in the field' (Sundqvist

and Lönnqvist, 2016: 38). Questions arise as to whether special needs education is facilitated by integrating it in a more inclusive way in the ordinary classroom setting, rather than by segregating special needs students from other students in separate learning environments (see the systematic review by Sundqvist and Lönnqvist, 2016). The uncertainty surrounding special needs initiatives is often compounded by the question of how *quality* ought to be measured, for instance whether the student perspective – rather than solely the perspectives of teachers and/or parents – should be included, to an increasing extent, in order to assess whether special needs students themselves feel that the initiatives include them as active participants and work to their benefit. More longitudinal studies may enable further insights into the processes of inclusion and exclusion generated by special needs initiatives over a number of years (Sundqvist and Lönnqvist, 2016; see also Tetler and Baltzer, 2011).

Reforms and comprehensive intervention packages

Key reforms for upper secondary education and comprehensive intervention packages focusing on dropout reduction need to be acknowledged. Reform 94, as discussed above, is the most comprehensive reform of upper secondary education and training in Norway (Skulberg and Sund, 2009). However, a measure more specifically targeting dropout was implemented as the national Plan of Action against Dropout in Upper Secondary School (*Satsing mot frafall*) from 2003 to 2006. For this initiative, the 19 counties governing upper secondary schools in Norway were given a relatively large degree of freedom to adapt measures according to local conditions. A comprehensive qualitative evaluation (Buland *et al.*, 2007) suggested that the project had been successful in some local contexts. However, the evaluation was unable to demonstrate whether any specific measure – as part of the broader programme – in isolation had produced a causal effect on dropout. The fact that greater attention was drawn to dropout issues may have affected the dropout rates, rather than how the programme was implemented in different parts of Norway.

The Knowledge Promotion Reform (*Kunnskapsløftet*) in 2006 incorporated primary to upper secondary education, but only minor amendments to Reform 94 were suggested. Yet, reducing dropout was a primary aim through the adoption of basic skills (*grunnleggende ferdigheter*) such as reading, writing and numeracy from an early age. It was argued that without these skills, students would struggle in any subject (Hegna *et al.*, 2012).

In the period 2010–13, the nationwide programme New Possibilities (*Ny GIV*) – Completion of Upper Secondary Education and Training – focused on various measures to motivate students to complete upper secondary education. Two main projects were initiated as part of this programme: the Transition Project (*Overgangsprosjektet*) and the Follow-up Project (*Oppfølgingsprosjektet*).

The Transition Project (*Overgangsprosjektet*) aimed to provide intensified special needs education in each municipality in Norway to the lowest-performing 10 per cent of students after the first semester of their final grade of lower secondary school. By advocating The Knowledge Promotion Reform's emphasis on basic skills, the aim was to strengthen the students' literacy and numeracy skills. This provision of special needs education was to be continued if needed as the students transitioned to upper secondary education (Helgøy and Homme, 2013; Holen and Lødding, 2012; Lødding and Holen, 2013). Some indications of potential effects of the measure on dropout or associated factors have been found at a general level, but these effects are, at their best, of such a weak magnitude that they could be reflective of a broader development already set in motion at the time – irrespective of the implementation of the intensified special needs education (Eielsen *et al.*, 2013; Huitfeldt *et al.*, 2016).

The Follow-up Project's (*Oppfølgingsprosjektet*) target group was young people outside employment in the age range 16–21 who had finished upper secondary education too early or

showed clear signs of dropping out. In all 19 counties in Norway, available electronic resources were drawn upon and a monitoring service was established with responsibility for following up on these people. Closer collaboration between different agencies and actors responsible for helping youths in the respective counties was prioritized. However, a quantitative evaluation analysing student/registry data and employing questionnaires suggested that the project had not improved conditions considerably for those most at risk who have been outside education and work for more than a year (Sletten *et al.*, 2015).

Improved in-service training and education for adults responsible for students

Improved in-service training and education includes measures that aim to improve the competence level of key actors working around and for the students. It is thus recognized that these actors can encourage students to fulfil their aspirations and successfully complete upper secondary education. These actors include teachers and other staff in school, but also external actors responsible for students' career prospects (e.g. *Oppfølgingstjenesten*) or for their well-being, such as through the healthcare services. A common measure has been to offer post-qualifying education to such actors. Measures aimed at in-service training and education often emphasize the acquisition of expertise enabling key actors to 'see' the individual student, i.e. to identify early warning indicators and act promptly to prevent dropout (Sletten *et al.*, 2015).

Measures aimed at improving in-service training and education have arguably gained momentum. Previously, these measures were usually included as part of a broader reform or intervention package, as in the above-mentioned Plan of Action against Dropout from 2003 to 2006. However, in 2011 a long-term project aimed specifically at improving in-service training and education (*Fellesfag, yrkesretting og relevans*) was initiated. From the autumn semester of 2016, additional education and training opportunities and advice on educational resources in the classroom were offered to teachers, with school governors participating to ensure the project is well anchored and implemented in particular schools (Lillejord *et al.*, 2015: 17; Wendelborg *et al.*, 2014). As this project had yet to be concluded at the time at which the literature was searched, no noteworthy evaluation of the effects of this project was found.

Intercultural competences can be highlighted as particularly important in a globalizing world and an increasingly multicultural Norwegian society. A stronger emphasis on intercultural competences can equip school staff with the necessary expertise in order to address particular challenges that ethnic minority students may face. This would include the ability to teach with respect shown to the increased variety of cultural orientations and religious views in the contemporary classroom, in addition to accommodating the needs of bi- and multilingual students (Hernes, 2010; Solhaug, 2013). Because it may take time to build such expertise, intercultural competences should be better incorporated into the curriculum of teachers' education/training and continued professional development (Lillejord *et al.*, 2015: 16). We have observed some promising developments in this direction in Norway, but further and more systematic measures are encouraged (see Thomassen, 2016). Although comprehensive education has been promoted in Nordic countries, practices of cultural homogeneity and pressures of assimilation into the supposed values of the 'white' majority population – rather than adequately accommodating for and integrating ethnic minorities – have been the predominant trend (see Beach *et al.*, 2013). Norway has not, until recently, experienced larger-scale immigration to the same extent as former colonial powers such as the UK. This has, arguably, resulted in a situation in which the adoption of multicultural policies in the education sector has lagged behind recent developments towards increased *de facto* ethnic diversity in society (see e.g. Banting and Kymlicka, 2006). While the concept of *inclusive education* in the Norwegian context has primarily been synonymous with

raising the achievement level of special needs students (see e.g. Sundqvist and Lönnqvist, 2016), other western countries have been more at the forefront of promoting this concept also for ethnic minorities (for international trends, see e.g. Ferguson, 2008; Kamens, 2012).

Concluding remarks: Implications for research, policy and practice

This article and review of the extant research on dropout and measures implemented in Norway has introduced a systematic review elsewhere (Lillejord *et al.*, 2015: chap. 1) on student dropout in upper secondary education. The present article has focused more specifically on the extent to which dropout in upper secondary education constitutes a challenge to the principles of the Norwegian welfare state. Through a consideration of the ways in which social background factors such as class and ethnicity have a bearing upon which groups of students are most likely to drop out of upper secondary education, the romantic image of the success of the Norwegian welfare state has become blurred and it has become clear that the extent to which education – in and of itself – can equalize social inequalities (Cebolla-Boado *et al.*, 2017; Peter *et al.*, 2010) must be reassessed. Although this article has shown that various measures have been implemented to deal with dropout in Norway, these measures have largely failed to reduce the dropout rates, which have stabilized at around 30 per cent since Reform 94.

The Nordic welfare principle of an education for all has admittedly materialized into equality of access since Reform 94 made upper secondary education a statutory right. With almost 98 per cent of youths now starting upper secondary education immediately after compulsory education, Norway has an enrolment rate higher than many other OECD and partner countries with stricter enrolment requirements (see OECD, 2016). Yet, the dropout rates in upper secondary education are a stark reminder of the persisting inequalities in educational *outcomes* – entailing that an ‘inclusive education’ system providing access to upper secondary education for all who complete compulsory education has not transmuted into a guarantee of successful completion for all. The dropout rates in Norway reflect the situations in other comparable OECD contexts in which the majority of youths in upper secondary education (fluctuating from 60 to 80 per cent) do complete successfully, though with a significant minority left behind. The statistics overwhelmingly show that youths from particular disadvantaged backgrounds are overrepresented in the dropout rates – in Norway as well as in other comparable contexts (Lamb *et al.*, 2010).

As such, it could be asserted that the success of the improved access to upper secondary education following Reform 94 is not – on its own – a sufficient factor in fulfilling the full aspirations of the Norwegian welfare state. Without additional and effective measures to level the educational playing fields for youths from different backgrounds, wider societal inequalities may be perpetuated within educational settings. Rather than opting for the supposedly easy solution of putting the sole blame on the individual student, a broad set of factors contributing to dropout need to be addressed. Although social background factors alone cannot explain all cases of dropout, it is worrying that some researchers assert that dropout in upper secondary education is a decision primarily made by the individual student (see Frostad *et al.*, 2015 for a critical overview). These researchers often proclaim that ‘students finally decide to leave school for personal reasons, often in combination with low performance’ (Frostad *et al.*, 2015: 111). The consequence of such views is that the influence of factors outside the control of the individual student, such as their social background, is largely ignored.

Furthermore, putting the primary blame on the victims themselves – or the at-risk students – may contribute to these students becoming accustomed to being perceived as the ‘problem’ that needs to be ‘fixed’. This is an unfortunate situation. Although the search for evaluation studies of dropout measures in both the international (Lillejord *et al.*, 2015: chap. 4) and

Norwegian/Nordic literature could not convincingly determine which category of measures has the greatest effect on dropout or completion rates, it is clear that any measure aiming to reduce dropout needs to – at a minimum – build trust and establish caring relations with the student regardless of the context. By the same token, believing that so-called quick fixes – or shorter and less intensive initiatives – can act as a magic wand, automatically erasing all problems without the need of any further investment on the part of the adults responsible for preventing dropout, is futile. In order for dropout measures to be effective, they must not only be implemented properly, but require full commitment from all involved actors responsible for the measure's success and follow-up over a sustained period of time (see Lillejord *et al.*, 2015).

Despite the relatively bleak outlook presented in this article, it is viewed as promising that policymakers in Norway have commissioned a systematic review on dropout in upper secondary education – emphasizing the importance of improving the knowledge base in the education sector. The Programme for Enhanced Completion of Upper Secondary Education and Training [*Program for bedre gjennomføring i videregående opplæring*] was a recently implemented incremental reform to test a handful of dropout measures in selected upper secondary schools in order to measure their effects locally *before* they are implemented on a national scale. The selection of measures for evaluation has been influenced by, among other sources of information, the Knowledge Centre for Education's systematic review of effective dropout measures (Norwegian Government, 2016). It is hoped that, by taking into account that systematic review, policymakers will be in a better position to more confidently assess whether and which dropout measures will work, under which circumstances and for whom – contributing towards the realization of some of the core principles of the welfare state in the Norwegian education system, rather than predominantly through rhetoric.

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Appendix – Search strategy (Lillejord *et al.*, 2015)

References to be included from the below searches in the systematic review of effective dropout measures (Lillejord *et al.*, 2015) consisted of peer-reviewed articles and other systematic reviews, as well as 'grey literature' such as PhD dissertations and working papers.

Sample search strategy (adopted from Wilson et al., 2011)

(TI,AB("school dropouts" OR "school attendance" OR truancy OR "school graduation" OR "high school graduates" OR "school complet*" OR GED OR "general education development" OR "high school diploma" OR dropout* OR "alternative high school*" OR "drop* out" OR "career academ*" OR "school NEAR absen*" OR "chronic* NEAR absen*" OR "school enrollment" OR "high school equivalency" OR "school failure" OR "high school reform" OR "educational attainment" OR "grade promotion" OR "grade retention" OR "school nonattendance" OR "graduation rate" OR "school refusal")) AND (TI,AB(intervention OR quantitative OR "program evaluation" OR random* OR prevent* OR "pilot project*" OR "youth program*" OR counseling OR "guidance program*" OR "summative evaluation" OR RCT OR "clinical trial" OR "quasi-experiment*" OR "treatment outcome*" OR "program effect*" OR "treatment effect*" OR evaluation OR experiment* OR "social program" OR effective*)) NOT (TI,AB("post-secondary" OR undergraduate OR doctoral OR inmate OR schizophrenia OR "traumatic brain injury" OR autism* OR abuse OR antidepressant* OR "unipolar depression" OR risperidone OR "chronic illness" OR "major depressive disorder" OR bulimia OR buprenorphine OR malaria OR heroin OR cancer OR "major depression" OR "massage therapy" OR fibromyalgia OR Paroxetine OR clomipramine OR olanzapine OR tuberculosis OR "spinal cord injury" OR epilep* OR antiepileptic OR HIV OR psychosis OR OCD OR "obsessive-compulsive" OR EEG OR PTSD OR tourette* OR insomnia OR obes* OR anorexia OR methadone OR "borderline personality disorder" OR "mental retardation" OR "higher education" OR "college students" OR "treatment dropouts" OR "employee absenteeism"))

Electronic databases (searched between 2010 and 2014)

- Education Resources Information Center (ERIC)
- Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA)
- International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS)
- ProQuest Dissertations and Thesis A & I (PQDT A&I)
- ProQuest Dissertations and Thesis – UK & Ireland (PQDT UK&I)
- COS Conference Papers Index (COS)
- ProQuest Education Journals (PQEJ)

Hand searches (2014 to the first quartile of 2015)

- Tables of contents of the most cited peer-reviewed journals as identified from the results of the electronic database searches
- A search in Google Scholar for the most cited authors as identified from the results of the electronic database searches
- Databases of other relevant knowledge centres (Campbell Collaboration, Danish Clearinghouse for Educational Research, Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre [EPPI-Centre])
- REPEC (Research Papers in Economics) database (searched from 2010)

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