Chapter 12
Dropout in a School for All: Individual or Systemic Solutions?

Trond Buland and Ida Holth Mathiesen

12.1 Introduction

Norwegian school reforms during the 1990s established an upper secondary school for everyone, guaranteeing a place for all pupils. As a result, nearly 100 % of all pupils in lower secondary school progress to upper secondary school. Over time, local and central authorities realized that this success was only partial. The dropout rate is high; an average of around 30 % of those starting upper secondary school do not complete. Too many of those who do not finish upper secondary school later develop weak interactions in their working lives. During the same reform period, Norwegian local government went through a period of transformation and restructuring, characterized by new public management and a reduction of the number of people working with administration in municipalities and counties. As a part of this, local school authorities reduced their central staff and delegated more tasks to the individual schools.

Studies of various efforts and interventions to reduce the dropout rate show that this is a complex problem; heterogeneous tools are needed, and it is necessary to establish this work in primary and lower secondary schools. Local school authorities often lack resources, expertise, and personnel to implement effective strategies and local policies, therefore resulting in wide variations between schools and between municipalities/counties. How can the school authorities and the schools themselves work toward preventing dropouts in a school intended for all? What can we learn

T. Buland (✉)
Program for Teacher Education, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Trondheim, Norway
e-mail: trond.buland@plu.ntnu.no

I.H. Mathiesen
IRIS Social Science, International Research Institute of Stavanger (IRIS), Stavanger, Norway
e-mail: Ida.Holth.Mathiesen@iris.no

from various studies of strategies and interventions aimed at reducing early school leaving? This chapter will argue that local actors need to develop policies aimed at both individual students and at the school system, and that the local "school owners" have an important role to play in this. One important question related to this is how the political changes over the last decades, influenced by new public management, have affected local authorities' ability to play a central role in this work.

The ambitions of this chapter are to summarize some important findings from studies of various public strategies and interventions aimed at reducing early school leaving and increasing school attendance in Norway in the period from 2000 through the present day. The main empirical sources of this chapter are several studies carried out at SINTEF Technology and Society[1] (Buland et al. 2004, 2011; Havn and Buland 2007; Buland and Dahl 2008; Buland and Rønning 2010; Buland and Valenta 2010; Bungum et al. 2010). In addition to these studies, the chapter rests heavily on other academic studies and evaluations of dropouts and interventions to reduce dropouts in Norway and elsewhere.

12.2   Toward a Common School for All

At the end of World War II, Norway could, to some degree, be described as a semi-agrarian society. In 1946, approximately 30 % of the workforce was involved in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries. As late as 1962, approximately 19 % of the total workforce was occupied in the same industries, while the statistics in 1973 revealed 11 %.[2] There was still a considerable demand for unskilled labor in all industries, and a relatively small part of each generation continued their education beyond the 7 years of compulsory school. In 1957, approximately 10 % of the total number of students were enrolled in secondary general school, while 8.5 % were studying in colleges or universities. Today Norwegian pupils complete 10 years of primary and lower secondary school (1–10) and have the right to complete 3 years (4 years in vocational education and training) of upper secondary education. Approximately 70 % complete their upper secondary education. In the age group 19–24, 31 % were enrolled in higher education in 2010.[3] In the population as a whole, 28 % have completed higher education.[4]

The end of World War II marked the start of a rapid evolution, some would say a revolution. As part of the reconstruction of Norwegian society after 1945, the manufacturing industry and the public sector grew, and the primary industries gradually declined.

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[1] SINTEF Technology and Society is a multidisciplinary research institute that operates in the fields of science and technology and the social sciences. The institute is based in Trondheim, Norway.

[2] By 1990, this percentage was reduced to 2.6 %. All based on figures from *Statistics Norway: Historisk statistikk 1994* and Ramsøy and Vaa (1975).

[3] http://www.ssb.no/utdanning_tema/. Downloaded 24.05.12.

[4] http://www.ssb.no/utniv/. Downloaded 24.05.12.

New technologies were introduced in all sectors of society, and the demand for formal skills and higher education expanded. At least for some part of Norway, this period marked the real transition from a semi-modern to a modern society. The credo of the epoch was economic growth through productivity, and this was combined with a strong belief in science as a tool for socioeconomic development. Inspired by the wartime experience, central politicians, especially in the Labor Party, wanted to use science as a foundation for social development (Telhaug and Mediås 2003, pp. 145–147). In the words of Vannevar Bush, scientific progress was seen as essential for all social progress, and "…without scientific progress no amount of achievement in other directions can insure our health, prosperity, and security as a nation in the modern world" (Bush 1945). If this vision were to become a reality, the school system had to change in a way that would enable more people to participate in and complete higher education.

At the same time, a more democratic distribution of higher education became a part of the Labor Party's postwar program. To open up the road to higher education for broader social groups was the aim of the ruling social democratic Labor Party, an aim shared by most of the political landscape. As a result of this general process of transition and modernization, Norwegian schools went through a series of trans-formations. A closer examination of the transformations of Norwegian primary school can be found in the country's report in this book. This section of the book will concentrate on the development of the upper secondary education in Norway.

In 1994, the "Reform 94" established the present system for upper secondary educa-tion by giving every pupil completing lower secondary education the right to 3 years of upper secondary education. The system also guaranteed every student the right to a place in one of three chosen study programs and established the present model of voca-tional education and training (VET). This model, known as the "2 + 2 model," consisted of 2 years in school and 2 years of apprenticeship in a firm. This model is based on cooperation between the public and private sectors, described by some as a corporatist inspired system (Markussen et al. 2011, p. 255).

In 2006 the government saw the need to reform the whole system of primary school, lower secondary school, and upper secondary education and training through the "Knowledge Promotion Reform" (Kunnskapsløftet). This involved no major changes in the structure of the system.

12.3   Governance of Education in Norway: Between Tradition and New Public Management

Norwegian local and regional authorities consist of two levels, the municipalities and the counties. There are at present 430 municipalities and 19 counties. The municipal sector is marked by many small units. The local economies vary, but a considerable amount of municipalities are struggling with tight budgets due to the falling popula-tion and tax income. Inspired by international trends in the organization and ideology of governance in the public sector, development in Norway since 1980 has been characterized by an increased degree of decentralization of local government.

Norwegian municipalities and counties have gone through a period of reorganization inspired by New public management. To reduce bureaucracy, the central staff has been reduced and authority has been delegated to the executing units, the service providers (Kleven and Hovik 1994). The process has also been characterized by a larger degree of target-oriented management. While the state defines the goals, the local authorities have been delegated more freedom of action when it comes to implementing policies in a local context. This model raises some clear requirements and challenges for local government. The municipalities must have the necessary scope for action, economically, politically, and administratively, to be able to establish the necessary priorities and make the appropriate decisions. This scope of action requires that the necessary skilled staff follow up and implement goals defined by the state.

Since the 1980s, a large number of municipalities were transformed into "two-level municipalities," with small or no formal centralized professional divisions. The traditional municipal education committees and chief municipal education officers have, to a large degree, been abolished. Expert knowledge, as a result, has been concentrated in the executing units, in our case the schools, with less specific competence in the administration.

Secondary education in Norway is administered as a three-level system of government: state, county, and municipalities. Municipalities are the smallest unit of local government in Norway and are responsible for primary education (through tenth grade). Upper secondary schools are owned and administered by the counties.

The system today can be described as a mixed system of governance, balancing centralized and decentralized administration and authority. The state defines the goals and provides basic funding, while local and regional authorities are by law responsible for the management and development of their own schools (Dalin 1995). Counties and municipalities are allowed to delegate tasks to the schools (Markussen et al. 2011). This decentralization can be said to have been increased by the reform in 2006, the "Knowledge Promotion Reform" (Kunnskapsløftet). The state has passed on authority to the local level and to the schools while simultaneously increasing the level of audits and inspections/supervision. While the traditional Norwegian system has been described as centralized, the Knowledge Promotion Reform marked a transition from process-oriented state control to a more goal-oriented system, giving a larger degree of local freedom as to how the national goals are to be reached. While the Knowledge Promotion Reform cannot be described as pure New public management, the reform still has some clear traits of this tradition. In addition, the reform has to exist in a local public sector clearly inspired by NPM for the last decades. This defines some of the framework and constraints of the reform and for the work in preventing dropouts in upper secondary school.

12.4   The Success That Faded

Sometime in the late 1990s, it became clear to many that the system did not work as intended in higher secondary education. Reform 94 abolished "the sorting school" and gave everybody the right to attend high school. One result of this has been that

close to 100 % of each age group continues from lower secondary school to higher secondary school. It is also a fact that far more students complete high school today than before the reform. However, the number of students that do not complete or pass the exams is disturbingly high. Although the numbers are uncertain and depend on where and when measuring is done, it appears that some study programs had and still maintain a dropout rate of over 30 % (Gjennomføringsbarometeret 2012).[5] It has become clear that several Western countries also face the same situation (Lamb et al. 2011; Orfield 2006). According to OECD's annual report (OECD 2012), 56.7 % of Norwegian students complete upper secondary school within 5 years. The average for the OECD countries is 69.8 %.

Several studies show a clear correlation between dropping out of high school and the risk of ending up in a marginalized position in relation to the workforce (Hernes 2010; St.meld. 16 (2006–2007)). Jobs requiring little or no requirements for formal qualifications are not as plentiful as before, and therefore the paved roads to the future for young people who do not complete upper secondary school are limited. Young people completing upper secondary school have a stronger connection to the labor marked than young people who drop out. As a group, people having completed upper secondary school work an average of 6 % more weekly hours than the comparable group of people not completing (Falch and Nyhus 2011). Research shows that young people who drop out of higher secondary education are more likely to become dependent on public support than those who complete secondary education (Hernes 2010). This is negative for the individual who risks entering a marginalized position, but this also has major consequences on a national economic level (Rasmussen et al. 2010; Falch et al. 2010, 2011). The overall cost of the present dropout rate has been computed to approximately NOK 5 billion a year[6] (Hernes 2010). Efforts to prevent young people from dropping out of high school are a very important element in the overall strategies to get more people into work and fewer on welfare, and there is great political interest in this issue.

12.5 Dropout and Marginalization

Marginalized groups have many characteristics, but they have all been through a marginalization process, which has gradually brought them into various degrees of social exclusion. Marginalization refers to the various stages between inclusion and exclusion in society. Inclusion refers to a person in steady employment with a stable connection to the community, while exclusion connotes that a person is situated permanently outside the labor market and has a weak connection to the community

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[5] http://www.regjeringen.no/upload/KD/Kampanjer/NyGiv/Statistikkprosjektet/barometer2012_1.pdf *Gjennomføringsbarometeret* [The completion barometer] is a biannual statistical overview of the development regarding school completion in Norway, published since 2011, as a part of the NY Giv – New Possibilities strategy, led by the Ministry of Education and Research.

[6] In the USA, economists have estimated the lifetime economic losses from dropouts in a single high school graduating class at $335 billion (Rumberger 2011, p. 255).

(Stjernø and Saltkjel 2008). Indicators of marginalization can be prolonged unemployment, involuntary part-time employment, and unstable working and living conditions. Social marginalization will often involve a process in which a person moves from inclusion to exclusion (Halvorsen 2000; Brynner and Parsons 2002). Dropouts from upper secondary school can for some students be the starting point of the marginalization process that results in a weak attachment to the labor market and important social institutions and a reliance on public support and social welfare (Hernes 2010).

The relationship between completed upper secondary education and stable attachment to the labor market is relatively clear. Young people without upper secondary education are overrepresented in unemployment statistics. Various studies also show a correlation between the dropout/marginalization and health, livelihood, and other social challenges. The likelihood of receiving disability benefits is five times higher for those who do not complete high school as for those who complete, and the suicide rate is twice as high for those who drop out of school (Hernes 2010, p. 7). Various estimates of the social costs show great potential for profit if one manages to reduce the number of early dropouts.

12.6 Preventing Dropout: The Heterogeneous Art of the Possible

The following section will summarize some important findings and lessons learned from various Norwegian projects and interventions aimed at reducing the dropout rate in upper secondary schools. This presentation will serve as examples of interventions and knowledge that should be at the core of further work in this area. Conditions for success, especially in regard to the role of the school owners, i.e., local school authorities in the age of neoliberalism, will also be discussed.

12.6.1 Dropouts: No Single Cause

One important finding from practical work on dropout reduction and the studies of such interventions is that it is difficult to find one single cause for dropping out of school. Early school leaving is a result of the interplay of multiple different factors connected to the individual student and to the system. To quote a study of dropouts in the USA, "It is virtually impossible to demonstrate a causal connection between any single factor and the decision to quit school" (Rumberger 2006a, p. 132).

Some informants have emphasized that consciousness-raising of those involved is possibly the most important step in all interventions in this field. "It doesn't matter what you do, as long as you do something" was the conclusion of one of the actors involved in the first national Norwegian strategy against early school leaving (Havn and Buland 2007). His point was that the important step was to make all actors in school accept and realize that dropouts are a problem, not a solution to a

problem, in the sense that dropouts tend to reduce the number of students perceived as problems in the learning environment. When that important step is made, effects are likely to follow from a wide spectrum of interventions.

The same conclusion is made by a meta-study of interventions to increase school attendance, made at Loyola University in Chicago:

> Because interventions did result in a moderate effect on student attendance, it is recommended that practitioners and policy makers do take steps and intervene with students who are exhibiting problematic absenteeism/truancy. Doing something is better than doing nothing. (Maynard et al. 2011, p. a5)

12.6.2   Factors of Presence and Absence

To understand the complex phenomenon of dropouts in upper secondary school, the concepts of *factors of presence* and *factors of absence* are clarifying. This frame of analysis is borrowed from the social studies of working life and research on prevention of sickness absence at work (Aarvak et al. 1980; Svarva 1991; Karasek 1979). These concepts can also be linked to Gambetta (1987) and his concepts of "push" and "pull." Gambetta used these concepts in an analysis of young people's choice between getting into the labor market early or getting a higher education and the factors that affect this decision. He distinguishes between "push-from-behind," which includes the expectations of parents and social background, and "pull-from-the-front" that involve various degrees of rational choice based on the young person's own wishes. Gambetta also refers to "jump," a high degree of rational choice and an active decision-making process into which individuals "take the plunge themself" (Gambetta 1987).

When studying the degree of sick leave in various firms, one noticeable finding has been that workers seem to respond differently to illness and challenges in the workplace environment. Exposed to the same medical and/or workplace challenges, employees in one firm will choose to report sick, while in another firm the same group of employees will choose to continue working. Crucial in understanding this phenomenon is to identify the heterogeneous factors influencing and shaping different actors' strategies for coping with challenges related to health and the workplace environment. Such factors may be factors of presence, i.e., different factors contributing to individual's choosing to remain at work. Factors of absence, on the contrary, are different factors drawing or pushing the individual out of work.

Translated to the context of dropouts in upper secondary school, the factors of absence are the immediate reasons why students choose to leave school. Similarly, the factors of presence are the immediate reasons why students choose to remain in school. The important point is the complexity of push and pull factors at work in a young people's life and their relationship to school and formal education.

The factors of absence can be found both inside and outside of school, and especially in the large border areas in which the students' lives and world outside of school meet and merge in a seamless web.

In school, factors of absence may include issues such as the experience of having chosen the "wrong" study program, based on insufficient or inadequate knowledge, or not having been able to get their first choice of study program. Poor learning environment, a low degree of adapted learning processes, frustration over his or her own poor performance, and level of mastery will for some be important factors of absence. To others, a low degree of adapted learning environment and adapted learning can be key factors that help to understand a dropout. For still others, the frustration/problems connected to the transition between schools, classes or levels of education, poor classroom environment/noise/social issues in class, bullying, racism, language problems, poor physical working environment, poor personal relations to with teachers, etc., can be the factors contributing to an individual's decision to leave school.

Outside of school, the factors of absence may be a wide score of elements affecting a young individual's life and situation. Poor housing, challenges connected to having to live away from home, tiring/long travel to school, difficult family relations, economy, drugs/alcohol, mental health problems, physical illness, and other interests/job that takes the focus away from school are mere examples of factors that can contribute to drawing an individual student away from school.

Factors of presence can be situations in which the student experiences mastery of his or her situation, adapted learning environment or processes, feelings of belonging and friendship, individual focus, the feeling of being visible/being seen by the system, perceived safety, the absence of bullying, academic mastery and progress, participation, and safe, predictable frames of life, both inside and outside of school.

Among the early warning signs related to early school leaving, low/poor learning outcome and/or high degree of unauthorized absence in lower secondary education are among the most prominent. Students with low marks and/or a high rate of absenteeism are more likely to leave school in early upper secondary education than students with high marks and low degrees of absence.

While both learning outcome and absence from school can be seen as causes of later dropout/early school leaving, the same factors are results of the students' earlier school history. The degree of motivation for school and learning is a crucial factor behind the students' decisions to drop out or stay in upper secondary school. Research indicates lower secondary school is an important period, related to students' motivation. For a considerable group of students in Norway, there is a significant drop in motivation for learning and schoolwork, from grade four and up into lower secondary school (Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2011). For some students, an important factor of absence, low motivation, therefore is established during lower secondary school. One of the main conclusions of Rumberger's study of dropouts in high school in the USA confirms that students start disengaging themselves long before they actually enter high school. Therefore, effective prevention strategies must target the vulnerable students as far back as the early elementary grades (Rumberger 2011).

Having a clear goal/aim seems to be an important motivating factor for many. Making an early decision about future education and work seems to motivate students. Students who have made a decision about a future area of study and/or occupation as early as lower secondary school seem to better meet the challenges in

upper secondary school as compared to those who have not made any clear decisions about their educational or occupational future.

In understanding both factors of absence and factors of presence, the teacher is a key factor. "All real living is meeting," wrote Martin Buber, accentuating the dialogic core of social interaction (Buber 2004, 2010), and surely this is the case in education, maybe more than anywhere. The crucial meeting between student, mentor, and task is a key relational element in all learning. To understand why and how people learn and why choices are made, it is important to study this triangle, this crucial "betweenness" between student and teacher. This is also true when talking about the dropout situation. The presence of a good teacher, seeing and understanding the individual student and giving needed support at the right time, will in many cases be the crucial factor behind the choice of staying and completing school. Likewise, the experience of a poor teacher, a teacher that is perceived as uncaring/indifferent and or academically weak, can be the key element in an individual student's choice to drop out as a personal solution.

The main point is that the challenge of early school leaving is complex and heterogeneous. The ultimate determining factor behind an individual student's decision to stay on or drop out of education may be a combination of different factors. It is difficult to identify one single cause explaining the phenomenon. Every single dropout can be seen as unique, and the story behind every single dropout can be seen as the interplay of a set of heterogeneous push and pull factors on different levels surrounding the individual, as illustrated in Fig. 12.1.

It is in this context, between individual and systemic factors, and especially in the liminal zones where the individual's life inside and outside of school meet and sometimes crash, that the decisions to leave or remain in school are made. The answer to the question, "Were they pushed or did they jump?" (Gambetta 1987) in the Norwegian context seems to be, "Yes, they were pushed and jumped." The individual student makes her or his decisions influenced by push and pull factors, the proportion of the mixture being crucial for the outcome.

Classical sociology describes three archetypical individual strategies of mastering situations marked by conflicts, situations, or institution in conflict with the individual's desires, needs, and personality. These three strategies are exit, voice, and loyalty. The strategy described as "loyalty" involves the individual's subordination to the system. The individual will adapt and remain loyal to the institution. "Voice" describes the strategy of change, where the individual speaks out and by various means tries to change the situation or system, to become more in line with the individual's own wishes and needs. In the "exit" strategy, the individual will try to solve the untenable situation by removing himself/herself from the situation or system. If you find yourself unable to adapt to the situation and are unable to change it, the remaining solution is to leave (Hirchman 1970).

Students dropping out or never starting in higher secondary school can be perceived as having chosen the exit strategy of coping with a problematic situation. Faced with overwhelming factors of absence, dropping out of school can be a logical consequence, a rational choice, and the only viable strategy for mastering one's own life.
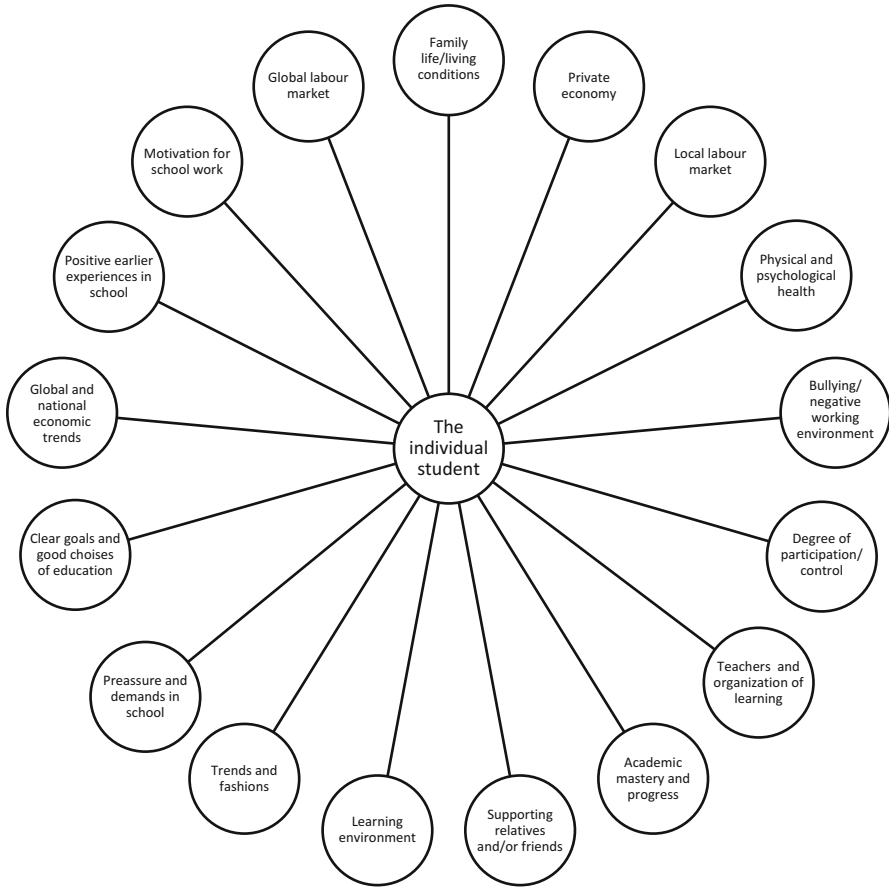
Fig. 12.1 Factors influencing the individual student's choices

Given this perspective, the main challenge in a sustainable strategy of dropout prevention would be to develop and change the frames surrounding the individual students, combining systemic and individual actions and interventions. The aim of such interventions must be to change the students' situation characterized by few and weak factors of presence and many strong factors of absence. Efforts and interventions must concentrate on developing a context marked by strong factors of presence, situations where exit no longer is perceived as the only viable strategy by and for the individual student. The challenge in this work can be that every individual responds differently to many factors and a factor of presence for one student can be a factor of absence for another. Friendship can be an example of this: If the friends are in school and share ambitions regarding school, they can be an important factor of presence. However, if friends have a negative relationship with school and denigrate it, this can be an important factor of absence.

Since factors of presence and absence are complex and heterogeneous and can be found both inside and outside of school, a sustainable effort in dropout prevention must be developed on a broad scale, focusing both on the individual student *and* the system, the school *and* the surrounding society. Dropout prevention must focus on the complexity of the student's life and the systems surrounding and co-shaping it. It is necessary to develop a totality of efforts and actions, more than isolated "good ideas" and universal solutions. Holistic approaches, not quick fixes, must be the cue.

The necessary factors of presence are shaped by a diversity of tools and actions and deliberate, focused combinations of actions. Broadscale and long-term efforts are important conditions of success. This is one of the main lessons from work on dropout prevention in Norway, and research in other national contexts points to the same conclusion:

> If dropout prevention strategies are going to be effective, they must be comprehensive by providing resources and supports in all areas of students' lives. And because dropouts leave school for a variety of reasons, services provided them must be flexible and tailored to their individual needs. (Rumberger 2006b, p. 243)

Two main categories for classification and interpretation of interventions to prevent dropout/marginalization are the distinction between *prevention* and *follow-up actions*. The main element of *prevention* is the challenge of creating the general framework and conditions for establishing the necessary factors of presence for all students. The general school life, learning environment, and the social environment surrounding the students must contribute to preventing dropouts.

Effective prevention is about developing good routines and systems to detect early warning signs and responding to them before it is too late. *Early effort* is one of the key terms in all interventions against dropping out. Early effort is crucial to success. Effective interventions and strategies for building viable learning environments adapted to all students must start early to create the motivation and mastery needed in the individual students. More students must experience education and learning as something of importance, something of relevance for them. This is essential for future participation in training. Early efforts must then be followed up with continuous, system anchored work over time.

In the *follow-up* part of viable interventions against dropouts, it is also important to establish good routines and systems, to respond and act on the basis of the warning signs observed in the individual student. Thus, one can identify students early who are at risk, before the situation has developed for a long enough time for dropping out to become inevitable. If the student can be reached before their school life is affected, they may choose to continue in school. Further efforts must also be made to bring those who have already dropped out back into a planned and systematic course of training, job, or other meaningful activity.

The right choice is, of course, essential in reducing the dropout rate. Many students make their choice of upper secondary education on an uninformed basis. Awareness and information that can contribute to good choices is essential. Therefore, it is important to focus on strengthening the way school can aid the student's choice of further education (Buland et al. 2011).

Much focus and interventions in the fight against dropouts and marginalization have been aimed at students who for various reasons are not able to reach the standard goals of the Norwegian educational system, which are university and college admissions certification or a trade certificate.[7] Work focused on partial qualifications, partial competence, or lower levels of qualifications has been an important part of this. Establishing alternative courses of learning, leading to realistic goals for the individual, may contribute to giving the students a greater experience of mastery and fewer defeats, thus encourage greater accomplishments (Markussen et al. 2006, 2008). The primary need of some groups of students is an education that can serve as a step toward a secure place in the labor market. What is needed to achieve this the basic knowledge of working life, knowledge of what is required in order to participate in working life, and basic professional skills. Attitudes and basic social skills are essential in this effort. It is important that this alternative is something that students must be able to actively choose and enter, and not something that is only available after a number of failures to attain the formal competence at the end of the so-called normal model, as may too often be the case.

12.6.3   The Difficult Transitions

Much work related to the reduction of dropout and marginalization has focused on the various transitions in the education system as critical points, transitions that for some students may trigger a dropout. "The thirteen-year training course," well known from political statements and principal speeches, is not a continuous course, but rather characterized by a series of transitions that for many young people is perceived as large and sometimes dramatic (Orfield 2006; Havn and Buland 2007). Starting at a new school and the transition between different levels of school, between the basic course and advanced courses, and between schools and in-service training has, therefore, been a priority in many planned interventions. Better adapted or tailored school starts for those individuals who need it, and better systems of information exchange between lower and upper secondary schools are examples of that kind of strategy/intervention (Buland and Valenta 2010).

The "Transition Project" (Overgangsprosjektet) in the Ny GIV – New Possibilities,[8] the present government's ongoing commitment to dropout prevention, focuses on this issue by offering voluntary additional training through the 10th grade to give students with weak or low learning outcomes a better academic base on which to start upper secondary school. A main challenge in this intervention is to recruit the "right" students, the individuals in the target group. Since this is the group of students with the weakest learning results, they will often also lack the necessary motivation to volunteer for participation. If school

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[7] The certificate awarded on successful completion of a vocational training course and entitling the holder to practice the trade concerned.

[8] http://www.regjeringen.no/en/dep/kd/campaign/ny-giv---new-possibilities.html?id=632025

is seen as a problem for these individuals, additional schooling may not be seen as an adequate solution.

Some of the work related to transitions has focused on better utilization of experiences from lower secondary school at the start of upper secondary school. Research has shown that the danger signs associated with dropping out are clear as early as middle school, and that it is possible with a reasonable degree of certainty to identify students who are at risk of dropping out of upper secondary school. It is, therefore, important to be able to utilize this information when students change schools, in order to tailor-make transitions and learning environments for those in need of such adaptations. Without these early warning signs, it is harder for upper secondary schools to intervene early in the student's new learning environment (Buland and Valenta 2010; Markussen et al. 2011).

A number of interventions and work on dropout prevention in the Norwegian context have focused on creating factors of presence by creating a better school experience for students (Havn and Buland 2007). Focus in many local projects has been on customized/adapted training in order to create mastery experiences for the individual student. The goal is to create clear structures in the learning situation, thus providing security and greater opportunity for mastery.

In those parts of the country where many students, due to great distances and dispersed settlements, are compelled to live away from home, much work has also been focused on problems related to living away from home (Havn and Buland 2007; Buland and Valenta 2010). Interventions of this type focus on what is referred to as the interface between the student's life inside and outside school, the important liminal zones in the student's life. These interventions seek to establish the necessary factors of presence in a student's life outside the school gates.

Some students obviously need training options outside the school to achieve their planned target of competence. For some, the classroom clearly is not the optimal arena for learning. More practice-oriented learning can be a good tool for improved learning for all groups, not only for the weak students but also for the strong (Buland and Dahl 2008; Buland et al. 2004). It strengthens this work if the schools have relatively fixed networks of companies and training offices for cooperation, counselors in career planning, and learning arenas for students who need alternatives to the classroom. Good collaboration across organizational boundaries is a key success factor in such work. This is challenging and requires both time and space to be developed. The Follow-up Service (OT)[9] and local businesses are in many areas actively participating in such interventions, and establishing solid networks of cooperation between these and other relevant agencies and stakeholders in the community is very important (Bungum et al. 2010; Havn and Buland 2007).

Parents/guardians are a key part of the support network around the individual student, and measures that can contribute to increased parental involvement are essential. Important work was carried out with the aim of creating systems and arenas for parental involvement, to draw parents in more closely to follow up on their

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[9] The public agency in charge of following up young people (between 16 and 21 years) who are neither in school nor at work and helping them to get back into school or in work.

own children and to better utilize the parent group's major skills (Havn and Buland 2007; Einarsson 2006).

Much of the work against dropouts can be characterized as the construction of complex and solid support networks around the students. These heterogeneous networks must consist of actors with different competencies and roles, which together can help to give the student the opportunity to experience the necessary mastery within and outside of school, thereby making the choice of completing school a viable option for more students.

12.7 The Role of Local Authorities: The "School Owner" as a Driving Force in Development

A key factor in the broad strategy against dropouts is the role of the "school owners." In the context of the mainly public Norwegian schools, the school owners are the local authorities in municipalities and counties. The municipalities are responsible for the primary and lower secondary schools (years 1–10), while the counties are responsible for the upper secondary schools. As previously mentioned, the transitions between lower and upper secondary schools are crucial in understanding and preventing early school dropouts. The distribution of responsibility between the municipal and county levels is potentially problematic, because it can pose a challenge to the efforts of creating good and effective transitions between schools. In some cases, this is a critical factor in establishing effective dropout prevention.

Much experience has demonstrated the need for a "development agent" situated outside and above the individual schools to be able to implement a targeted, systematic effort for school development and for building a working coherent strategy/intervention against dropouts. By law, this role of "development agent" is given to local school authorities. This dimension has been central in several white papers on education, including the most important White Paper behind the reform "Knowledge Promotion Reform," St.meld. nr. 30 (2003–2004) *Kultur for læring.* In this document, the crucial role of the school owners as a condition for the development of good schools was repeatedly indicated.

The post-1990s Norwegian school system is among other things characterized by many small municipalities in charge of developing their own schools. Due to the widespread reorganization of local government described earlier, a majority of local communities are today without any centralized municipal education department. The local schools are directly placed under the chief municipal executive, the latter often lacking both the competence/expertise and the will to become heavily involved in school matters.

An evaluation made by the OECD pointed out the challenges connected to the important role of the school owners:

> In many parts of Norway, it is unrealistic to expect that individual school owners would be able to develop robust local quality assurance systems on their own and follow up with schools accordingly. It is likely to make more sense to build larger scale 'shared service'

approaches, which offer school improvement services, including external evaluation, coaching and consultancy, to groups of schools and school owners across a region. The County Governors could play a key role in promoting and supporting strategic partnerships between school owners and key sources of support. (Nusche et al. 2011, p. 15)

The evaluation of the reform Kunnskapsløftet has also pointed to the fact that the reform has been particularly challenging for the smaller municipalities, due to differences between municipalities with regard to both capacity and expertise needed to play an active role in the implementation of the reform (Aasen et al. 2012).

A lot of local expertise and authority is delegated to individual schools, emerging as autonomous units within the local municipality. Local politicians will be interested in questions regarding budgets and large-scale structural changes, and apart from that tend to leave schools on their own. In a decentralized system like this, success and failure in school development and dropout prevention will, to a large degree, be dependent on the ability and willingness of individual schools to build working local strategies over time. The dissemination of good practice is more difficult, as is the capability of goal-oriented, long-term efforts.

This may be most important today in lower secondary schools. The county authorities, being in charge of upper secondary education, are generally better equipped when it comes to centralized competent staff being able to perform the role of school developing agents. Where county authorities have chosen to keep up the pressure on dropout prevention over time, dropouts have been shown to decrease more than in counties where school authorities have chosen a more distant role. Long-term sustainable improvements in school completion rates require a focused, long-term effort from the school owners.

We have observed a process characterized by a partial atomization of the public school systems, where school owners are unable or unwilling to perform the duties of the Education Act given to them. Local freedom and room for development are not utilized to the necessary degree. Greater differences between individual schools within the same municipalities/counties may be the result if this process is allowed to continue. Skilled actors working in development-oriented schools led and assisted by focused and competent school leaders/principals may be able to achieve good results, while other schools in the same community may not achieve similar results. The result of this will be a school system where sheer luck will play an important role in the individual student's road toward completion or dropping out of upper secondary school.

12.8 Close-Up Action, Early Interventions, and Heterogeneous Tools

Several years of work and research on dropout prevention have presented us with some important lessons. To the disappointment of more than a few, it has not given us a magic wand, no universal solution, or no quick fix that will solve the problem once and for all or for all students regardless of local context.

The following section will address some important lessons learned from this research. As a starting point for understanding the following important points, we would like to quote Gudmund Hernes and his insight from 1974 on the school system's tendency to reproduce social inequality: "If you want children from different environments to get similar skills and somewhat equal life chances, they must be treated differently" (Hernes 1974, p. 25). By this Hernes emphasizes that children from different social backgrounds have different starting points and unequal possibilities to succeed in school and education. If the system meets and treats all individuals equally, this will tend to reproduce the differences. The school system needs to be able to treat each student according to his or her abilities and individual resources, to give them equal opportunities, and thereby contribute to reducing social inequalities. In the context of efforts to prevent early dropouts/non-completers, the emphasis is on the need to develop *the school system* in a way that makes possible both systematic *and* individual measures to prevent early school dropouts.

What are the main experiences and the important lessons to be learned?

First, it is clear that *diversity is a key factor* in interventions. As shown, the reasons behind dropouts are complex and heterogeneous. Each and every dropout can be perceived as unique, and even if there are some factors in common, this heterogeneous background must never be forgotten. Therefore, the approach to dropout prevention must be based on heterogeneous and diverse strategies and interventions. In the work to further school completion, as always in life, it is important to think several thoughts at the same time and be able to follow different strategic paths simultaneously. This is the first lesson from 10 years of work on dropouts and school completion in Norway, as elsewhere in the world:

> Early school leaving is not reducible to this or that factor. Early school leaving is a process that occurs in the context of all the things that are happening in a young person's life. (Smyte et al. 2004, p. 29)

The second lesson learned is that *early effort is a key factor*. Initiating dropout prevention once students have already started their upper secondary education will in many instances prove to be too late. The real psychological dropout occurs earlier, and prevention must begin early in lower secondary school, if not even earlier than that. Studies show that the motivation of a considerable group of students decreases sharply during lower secondary school. During the 3 years supposed to prepare them for upper secondary school, a considerable group of young people instead, through a series of negative experiences, establish a personal perception or notion that education and training is not something suited for them. This opinion travels with them into upper secondary school, where they for the first time are free to leave school. "Their only reason for starting in upper secondary school is because they want to drop out," as an experienced school counselor once explained.

Here, during these three crucial years, the important, focused, and conscious work aimed at reducing dropouts must be started and strengthened. It is here, in lower secondary education, that the motivation for learning and thereby a positive relationship to further education must be established in larger groups of students in danger of dropping out.

The third important lesson learned is that it is necessary to *work on both a system level and an individual level*. Dropouts are a result of both individual and systemic factors:

> These factors may be related to the characteristics and experiences of the students themselves, as well as the characteristics and features of their environment – their families, their schools, and the communities in which they live. (Rumberger 2011, p. 143)

Effective approaches to dropout prevention must therefore be multileveled and multifactored by nature. Defining dropout as a problem related only to the qualities and conditions of the individual student is insufficient. To work isolated with factors related to the system can be just as erroneous. To quote an Australian study of dropouts:

> We don't believe that any long-term sustainable improvements in school retention rates will be possible unless the complex interacting factors that interfere with successfully completing school are adequately understood and addressed. (Smyth et al. 2004, p. 15)

Long-term actions must be implemented focused on individual students *and* the broader system surrounding the individual. Complex *support networks* involving heterogeneous actors both inside and outside school must be established on a broad scale. All actors in school, down to the individual teacher, must be conscious of their role as a dropout prevention agent, of their place in the broader network. In this network, the school owners have an important role to play as agents for development, supporters of the individual schools, and builders of the local strategy.

The fourth lesson learned is that *there is a need to establish a more continuous course of schooling, a system where the many challenging transitions between levels are made more streamlined*, especially for those students who need it the most. The 13-year training course established through the 1980s and 1990s was characterized by a lot of transition, and these transitions are crucial when it comes to understanding and preventing dropouts. It is necessary to build a better support systems connected to those transitions. The system of counseling in schools must be strengthened throughout secondary school to help students make better informed and qualified choices for future education. Different levels of school teams must cooperate better in regard to the transitions of students than traditionally has been the case.

Last but not least, the work done during the last years demonstrates *the need to think more flexibly about the different tracks the individual students are supposed to follow through secondary school*. Reform 94 removed the "sorting school" and gave everyone the right to a secondary education. At the same time, that reform created a "normal model" for the course to follow – a normal model, according to some, adapted to a normal student who hardly exists. In order to give larger groups of students a better chance at completion, it may be necessary to adjust the system by creating more individually adapted trails through school and more adapted targets for the individual student or groups of students. The system must be more ready to adapt to alternative learning arenas and alternative approaches to learning. More practice-oriented training can be a tool that can help both weak and strong students toward reaching higher goals. The traditional classroom should not be the only

arena for learning. A heterogeneous student population calls for a more heterogeneous and diverse school system.

It is important that such efforts toward more flexible and adapted learning environments do not take place in at completely decentralized, atomized environment. It is important that the individual schools, while being central in the practical work, are not left on their own. Locally rooted work must take place within a working system involving actors and institutions on all levels, from the governmental level to the individual schools. Locally based action does not exclude a holistic working system of governance. On the contrary, active, competent, local, and central authorities can be a requirement for effective local development, tied to and not cut off from regional and national development.

Only through such diverse, long-term, and sustained effort and intervention, and not through any single, concentrated all-out effort or dramatic, heroic remedy, will it be possible to create a school and a learning environment dominated by factors of presence, eliminating more of the factors of absence, and thereby increasing completion in upper secondary school, and reducing the group that ends up in danger of entering a marginalized position in relation to employment and social life. The local school authorities can and must play an important role in this work to prevent students from dropping out of school. Are they able to fulfill their role? Some evidence suggests that the answer to this question is no. The process of decentralization characterizing the last decades of Norwegian school may have weakened local authorities' abilities to effectively intervene, supporting and strengthening their own school's efforts to prevent dropouts.

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