

***Decreased Motivation and Increased Mental Illness Among Young People - a Need
for Teaching Life Mastery Skills in School***

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Abstract

This study investigates how teachers can support students in lower secondary school to develop motivation and life-mastery skills by applying a five-step motivation method. The method is based on Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory, stating that in order to feel intrinsic motivation, the basic needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness must be met. The findings show that the majority of the students appreciate the motivation method, many of them become more motivated, and they manage to make plans and follow them up. In addition, the study shows that the motivation method proves to be a useful tool for the teacher to get a feeling of the class atmosphere, and insight into what the students are concerned with or what they struggle with. Based on our findings, we advocate the application of the five-step motivation method in lower secondary schools to support students to become equipped to handle the pressure and requirements they are exposed to in a modern educational society.

Keywords: motivation, self-determination, life-mastery and metacognition

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Introduction

“Human beings can be proactive and engaged or, alternatively, passive and alienated, largely as a function of the social conditions in which they develop and function”(Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68).

In recent years, national surveys have disclosed lack of motivation and high dropout rates as major causes for concern in Norwegian schools. The national student survey from 2017 (Skoleporten, 2017) exposes both a lack in motivation, as well as a reduction in the students’ motivation from year 7 to year 10. The same survey also reveals a lack in students’ perceived involvement. Ryan and Deci’s Self Determination Theory (2000) highlights the effect motivation has on learning. In addition, Thuen and Bru (2000) have emphasized the negative consequences for motivation and effort when students experience school subjects as tedious and of little relevance. This, in its turn, could cause a decline in motivation, and lack of motivation could cause problems in learning.

In addition to problems with learning, a recent report displays high dropout rates in upper secondary schools (Rambøll, 2015/2016). As of 2018, 43% of males who started vocational studies had not finished within 5 years. For males and females in both general and vocational studies the rate is 25% (*Gjennomføring i videregående opplæring*, 2018). A major American study holds lack of involvement and low motivation as the main underlying risk factors for school dropout (Rumberger, 2011). It is commonly known that dropout could have devastating consequences. Studies show that receivers of social aid and disability benefits are almost exclusively school dropouts (Falch, Johannesen, & Strøm, 2009) and that these often have challenges in the form of mental health issues and addiction (Furuberg & Myklebø, 2013). Both the dramatic link between lack of motivation in school, school dropout and its consequences for adult life, as well as the consequences lack of motivation can have on learning, underline the complexity of this problem and the need for a solution for systematic work with motivation in school settings, which is the focus of the current study.

This study is part of a larger project called “A Systematic Approach – the five-step Motivation Method” (SAMM¹), where we aim at developing an approach to working with motivation that can be applied across contexts. The project started in upper secondary school, and the current study investigates how this approach can be applied in lower secondary school. The method specifically focuses on developing and supporting metacognition and self-regulation (De Corte, 2010), strategies viewed as important for motivation in general and also highlighted in recent reports as central to the upcoming national curriculum reform in Norway (*Elevenes læring i fremtidens skole — Et kunnskapsgrunnlag*, 2014). It is also specifically aimed at supporting intrinsic motivation, through working with the students’ sense of autonomy, relatedness and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

According to self-determination theory, all students have a tendency for creativity and learning. However, supportive conditions are essential for intrinsic motivation and numerous non-supportive conditions could be disruptive (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 70).

¹ For more information about the project, see <https://samm.uia.no/en/frontpage/>

It is thus vital for schools to provide supportive conditions for students' intrinsic motivation. Several studies have shown that feelings of autonomy, relatedness and competence are central to intrinsic motivation, and studies have also found that teachers who are "autonomy supportive" provide helpful conditions for students' intrinsic motivation, curiosity and desire for challenge in addition to learning outcomes (Deci, Nezlek, Sheinman, & Manis, 1981; Flink, Boggiano, Barrett, & Sherman, 1990; Reeve & Jang, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan, Grolnick, & Sarason, 1986). Feeling competent also leads to an increased belief in one's own success, and as pointed out in Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, this again leads to increased motivation. The aim of this study is to try out a method that may provide school staff with a tool that supports autonomy, relatedness and competence in students, a method that may increase students' intrinsic motivation (see figure 1 below).

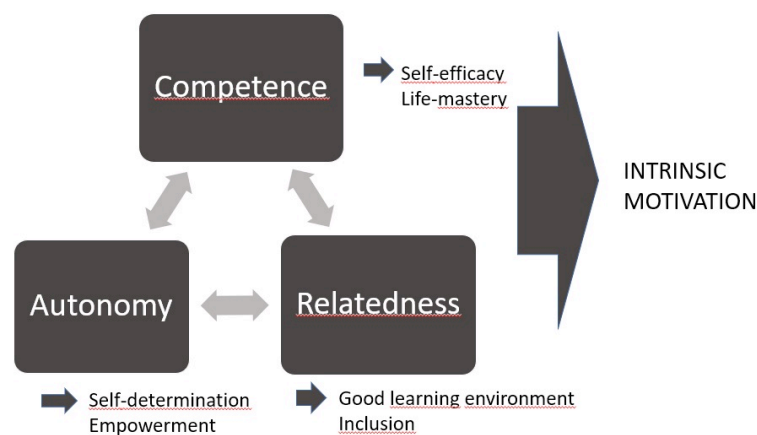


Figure 1: Self-determination theory (Based on Ryan & Deci, 2000)

The research question of this study is *how can we support students in lower secondary school to develop motivation and life-mastery skills?* To investigate this, we have carried out a teaching intervention in 6 lower secondary school groups with a focus on identifying what is important in life, what may hinder one in reaching one's goals and how these hindrances can be dealt with. We define this study a pilot-study, as it presents data from the initial stages of transferring the motivation method developed in upper secondary school to lower levels.

Methodology

This study is part of an action research project (Postholm) investigating how to work with motivation in the classroom. It is a multisite case study (Creswell, 2013), combining data from four lower secondary schools in the southern region of Norway. Although the informants were recruited through convenience-sampling, the selection of participant groups was strategic to a certain extent (Cohen et. al, 2011), as we recruited participants from different levels in lower secondary school. The study includes qualitative data in the form of student and teacher reflections and quantitative data in the form of answers to closed questions with a limited range of answers. More details are given below.

Teaching intervention

The teaching intervention applied in this project consists of a five-step motivation method repeated one or more times during the year. How often the method was repeated differs somewhat in the different groups. The first time the method was applied, it was split into two sessions, where the first session focused on identifying 1) what is important or goals, 2) success factors, and 3) obstacles, and the second session focused on deciding on 4) focus and 5) action (see figure 2 below).

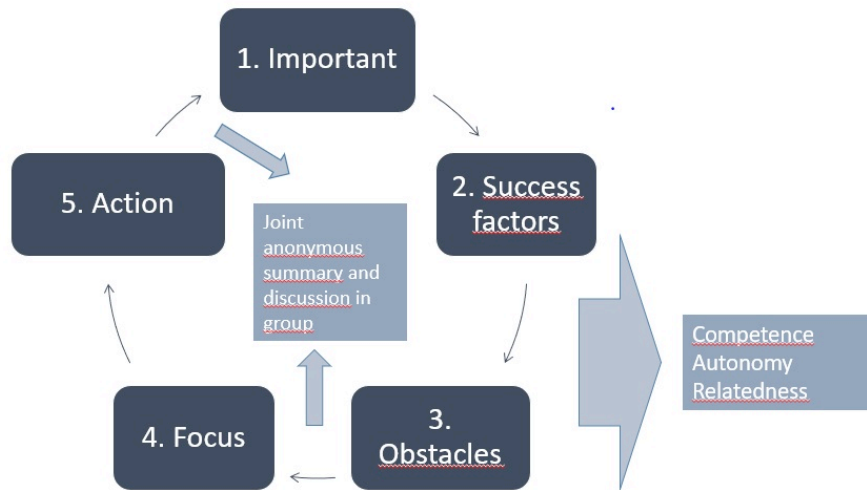


Figure 2. The five-step motivation method (Based on Langeland et al. 2018 and Horverak et. al 2018).

In the first session, the students discussed what was important or what goals they had in life, what they were good at or what was good in life already and what might be difficult and prevent them from being okay or reaching their goals. After the discussion, the students wrote answers to these questions in empty logbooks. They put a random number of their own choice on the front of the book instead of their name to ensure anonymity. The teacher collected the books after the session and summarised the students' notes. The following session, the teacher summed up in class what the students in the group had answered, and then they discussed what they could do to improve their situation or work towards their goals. Following this discussion, the teacher lay out all the logbooks for the students to collect to answer the final two questions; What do you choose to focus on the next few weeks and how will you manage this? The students wrote their own individual action plans, and the teacher collected the books again. In the third session, the teacher gave examples of action plans, and summed up what the students had decided to focus on and how to do this, and the group discussed whether there could be other ways of working towards their goals.

Data material and analyses

All the students' reflections from the motivation sessions are included as qualitative data in this study and have been analysed according to themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In addition, the students filled in questionnaires with some open and some closed questions. As this is a pilot-study in an action research project, the

questionnaire has been adjusted during the year in cooperation with teachers and other collaborators in the SAMM-project, hence different versions were applied. Some of the questions were similar in the different versions, and even though the wording may have been somewhat different, the answers have been collapsed. The students crossed out for gender, and they could consent to using their reflections for research and teaching purposes.

The final questionnaire used included the following questions; 1) How satisfied have you been with the motivation method? (a scale from «not satisfied» to «very satisfied»), 2) Have you become better at planning and knowing what is important for you (Options: “yes”, “no”, “I don’t know”), 3) Has the motivation method made you more motivated to work towards your own goals? (Options: “yes”, “no”, “I don’t know”), 4) Have you become better at finding solutions to difficult situations? (Options: “yes”, “no”, “I don’t know”), 5) Give examples of something you have focused on working with, 6) How did it go to follow your own plans? 7) Has the work with the motivation method affected the learning environment? If yes, how? Question 4 was not included in all the forms used, and instead of question 2, one of the forms included a question concerning whether the students felt the motivation method had been good for them. In addition to student evaluations, teacher evaluations from involved teachers have been included, and they answered on questions concerning how the students responded to the method, what was positive, whether there were challenges and whether they had suggestions for changes. The students’ responses to the closed questions are presented in percentages.

Sample

The sample consists of 68 (76% response rate) lower secondary school students from 4 different schools (see table 1). Two of the schools were located in rural areas, one school in a small town and one school in a city.

Table 1
Participants.

School	Level	Participants	Total number in group
School 1	8. grade	6	6
School 2	8. grade	16	24
School 1	9. grade	7	10
School 3	9. grade	21	30
School 1	10. grade	5	5
School 4	10. grade	13	15
4 schools	6 groups	68	90

There were 2 groups on each level, and this resulted in 30 participants from 8th grade, 40 participants from 9th grade and 20 participants from 10th grade. There were 34 girls and 33 boys in the sample, hence the sample is balanced in terms of gender. One student’s gender is not identified. 6 groups participated in total, three of which were quite small, hence they were collapsed in the motivation sessions.

Results

This study investigates how a five-step motivation method may support students to develop life-mastery skills, and the result section here presents findings on how the

students respond to this method. First, we have summarized examples of what the students wrote during the intervention concerning what is important for them, or goals they have, what is already positive and what obstacles they experience, as well as what they choose to focus on and how to do it. The summary is followed by a presentation of student evaluations on how they perceived the method and their own development. Lastly, we have included reflections from the teachers. All quotes have been translated from Norwegian.

Student reflections in logbooks

On the first question on what was important for the students, or what their goals were, many of them list that friends and family are important, and pets and hobbies. Some of them also write that they want to succeed or develop in sports, or more specifically football and handball. Quite a few are also concerned with taking drivers' licences of different types, such as tractor, boat and moped. Many of them mention that education or getting good grades is important, to concentrate in school, as well as getting a good job.

The success factors the students list are that they have parents who help them, or a supportive family, they have good friends and like sports. Quite a few of them also list personal skills or qualities, for example they are good at carpentry or repairing motors, they are good with pets, or they are kind, honest, caring, funny, «I'm funny, kind and think about how others feel» (student's quote). One of the students write «That I manage to carry out things I didn't think I would manage», which shows a level of reflection on not only skills but also limitations. and the ability to exceed these.

Obstacles many students mention are grades, tests, or pressure in school in general. They mention in particular maths, writing, learning German and New Norwegian (a second standard language in Norway obligatory in school). Dyslexia is also mentioned as a challenge. Several students struggle with concentrations and disruptions from for example mobile phones. Other health challenges that are mentioned are stress, mental issues, confusion, sadness, anger, exhaustion, lack of motivation and lack of sleep. «It's hard to get up in the morning», one student writes. Another student is very specific about his/her troubles: «I really feel nauseous nowadays. It makes me exhausted. I have performance anxiety, and I'm so sick of it. The nausea lasts almost the entire school day and I consider going home all the time». A couple of students write that it is an obstacle that parents are not engaged in their schoolwork or they argue with each other, and quite a few students write that they have issues with friends or struggle to find friends. One student writes:

That friends let me down again and again. That I don't see any light at the end of the tunnel. That my friends have made me physically and mentally exhausted. That the threshold for being best and perfect is too high and I can barely stand it. That I have reached rock bottom.

When choosing focus areas and actions, many of the students write that they will be social, include or contact other students and make new friends, and for example say «hi» to others. Here is an example of what a student writes about this in his/her action plan:

Focus: I will try to say hi and smile and be nice...I'll try to include people and be nice. I will give compliments to people.

Action: I will also make others happy and make them smile. I want to express a type of happiness to other people.

Other students focus on school, and write that they will study for tests, work at home at set times, concentrate better and focus in class, raise a hand or participate in class. Some will focus on learning theory for drivers' licences. Quite a few students mention exercising, for example handball or football. A couple of the students write that they will make plans or structure the days. Some students focus on getting more sleep, getting up earlier and going to bed earlier. Others mention that they are to put the mobile phone away or spend less time on the mobile. Here is an example of a student's action plan combining some of these elements:

Focus: My goal is to get to bed at 22:00 because I will be more focused at school.

Action: My plan is to put away the mobile and listen to calming music until I fall asleep.

Student evaluations

On the question of whether the students were satisfied with the method, 82,5% answered positively, 16% answered negatively and 1,5% did not know (N = 68). Some of them scored high on the satisfaction scale, others low, but the majority was generally just satisfied. Both girls and boys responded positively and negatively. The answers to questions with positive and negative answers are presented in table 2 below.

Table 2
Students' answers on evaluation form

Question	Yes	No	I don't know	Number of respondents
More motivated?	53%	20%	27%	55
Better at planning?	42%	14,5%	43,5%	55
Followed plans?	75%	10%	15%	68
Better at finding solutions?	21%	32%	47%	34
Good for you?	38%	8%	54%	13
Change in class environment?	15%	49%	36%	55

Note. The number of respondents is different in the various categories as some of the questions were not included in all the questionnaires. Therefore, N is reported for each question.

To the question on whether they had become more motivated, 53% answered positively and 20% answered negatively. To the question on whether they had become better at planning, 42% answered positively and 14,5% answered negatively, however, a majority of 75% reported that they followed their own plans. Half of the students were asked about whether they had become better at finding solutions, to which 21% answered positively and 32 negatively. About half of the students did not know. One of the groups were asked whether they thought the motivation sessions had been good for them, to which 38% answered positively and 8% negatively.

Another question has a somewhat different focus, as it asks about change in the learning environment and not change on an individual level. Here only 15% answers positively, whereas 49% find that there has been no change. Even though the number of students who believe there has been a change is very low, their comments show

that at least some students have made an effort to make a change. A couple of them write that it has become less noisy in class, and others write that they try to socialise with others; «I have at least given hugs and said ‘Hi!’», «I talk more with those students I didn’t talk to before». Another point made is as follows «I feel that perhaps more students dare to speak about how they feel». So even though few students have noticed a change, there are signals in the answers that something has changed.

Teachers’ reflections

One of the things the teachers comment on is that the method gives them an opportunity to pick up what is going on in the class, and what challenges and needs there are. Even though they do not know which students write what, they get an impression of what the students as a group are concerned with. It is also mentioned that some students were quite specific in their guidance to each other and gave good advice, for example that they could put away the mobile phone in a cupboard until they had finished their homework, and that if somebody came with unpleasant comments about them, they could talk directly to the person giving the comments.

A challenge that two of the teachers mention is that some students were demotivated to work with this method, and they did not really participate. Another teacher also mentions that disturbance in class is a challenge. Another issue mentioned is that it could be a challenge if something serious comes up, and the teacher has problems identifying the student who wrote this. However, it is also said that the teachers generally find out who has written it, particularly if there is something truly serious.

One of the teachers comments on something that is central in the motivation project, namely that the method gives the opportunity to reflect on personal issues in a school context: «It seems like the students find it both important and exciting, and that they feel that this concerns themselves as persons, and not just as students who are here to learn a subject.» Another issue mentioned by a couple of the teachers is that it is interesting to see how many success factors the students come up with. One of the teachers commented «It was quite fun to see, when looking at success factors and obstacles, it is easy to focus on what is difficult, but here the lists were equally long, they commented on many good things». This focus on success factors is something that is emphasised as very important in the motivation method, and it is interesting to see that young people in a vulnerable phase actually dare to speak out about their good qualities.

Discussion

This study set out to investigate whether the five-step motivation method presented here may support students in lower secondary schools to develop intrinsic motivation and life-mastery skills. The findings show that the students are generally able to apply the method and reflect on what is important for them, what success factors and obstacles there are in their lives, and the majority of the students also report that they followed their own plans on how to deal with their obstacles, or how to reach their goals. A majority also report that they were satisfied with the method, and about half of the group report that they became more motivated to learn. Many of them also report that they had become better at planning. The fact that many of the students feel that they improve their planning skills, and that the majority followed their own plans, can be seen as evidence that they developed autonomy as learners as a result of the

motivation method work. Furthermore, as pointed out by Bandura in his self-efficacy theory (1997), believing in one's own ability to succeed also influences motivation in a positive way.

We see from the analysis of the student reflections that they did not only focus on life-mastery in general in their plans, but they also focused on school, and they give specific examples, such as setting a certain time for practicing for tests, or raising their hands in class. This is a sign of self-regulating behaviour, and a sign that the motivation method works as a metacognitive learning strategy supporting students to plan how to improve their learning, in addition to working as a strategy for mastering life. Metacognition and self-regulated learning are viewed as being of importance for motivation in general. As referred to in NOU 2014:7 (*Elevenes læring i fremtidens skole — Et kunnskapsgrunnlag*, 2014), De Corte (2010) and Dinsmore et al (2008) hold that students' metacognition and ability for self-regulated learning could have positive effects on motivation. In Zimmerman and Schunk's (1989) definition of self-regulated learning (SRL) the students systematically orient their feelings, thoughts and actions towards fulfilment of their goals (Boekaerts, Pintrich, & Zeidner, 2005), which is what the students have done when working with the motivation method. As described in Boekaerts et al (2005), metacognitive skills include problem solving and the ability to create alternative paths in the face of obstacles. Students should be able to stipulate goals and subgoals, identify problems, explore and compare solutions, create and execute an action plan and monitor themselves. This is something that is also emphasised in the new curricula in Norway:

Life mastery is about being able to understand and influence factors that may be of significance for mastering one's own life. The topic will contribute to students learning to handle both success and hard times, and personal and practical challenges, in a best possible way. (Overordnet del, 2018:2.5.1. Folkehelse og livsmestring, our translation)

This is really the core of the motivation method, identifying obstacles and making plans on how to overcome these to achieve goals, and to do this systematically and continuously. Even though only a few students find that they have become better at finding solutions to problems, the method also gives the students a channel to go to the teacher with their problems, perhaps a low-threshold-channel, as they can write anonymously to the teachers. One of the students wrote the following in his logbook to answer the five questions:

Goal: Save money

Success factors: I have nothing to be happy about

Hindrances: Everything (anxiety and depression)

Focus: Not to take my life

Action: Need help

This student was identified and followed up and received help. As one of the teachers participating in the project said, just one story like this, saving one life, makes the method worth applying, even though some students might find it tedious and unhelpful. We argue that this method is a powerful tool for teachers, as it provides an opportunity to find out what concerns and challenges the students' have at the same time as it provides an opportunity for the students to develop intrinsic motivation through feeling autonomous and competent.

Conclusion

The main finding of this study is that the five-step motivation method presented here provides lower secondary students with a tool for mastering life and increasing their motivation. Many of the students became more motivated as a result of the motivation sessions, and many of them showed the ability to use the method and follow up their plans. Not all students benefited from the approach, but as pointed out, if it helps some students, it might be worthwhile to prioritise time in school to use it, even though not all students appreciate it.

Another positive aspect of the method that is highlighted by the teachers, is that it gives them as teachers an insight into the class atmosphere and possible conflicts. Also, serious mental issues are revealed, and may be followed up. It is emphasised that it is important to apply the method with a certain frequency, and that the students need reminders, as they tend to forget easily. It is also mentioned that it may take time to learn the approach, so there is a need for a long-term study to see if the method has an even stronger influence on the students if applied for a longer period, even for several years.

However, this study has its limitations, as we have a rather small and limited sample from just one region in one country. The findings may not be transferrable to other completely different contexts. There are also some differences in how the method has been applied, as the teacher manuals are not too detailed, and the teachers have had some freedom to find out how the method is best carried out in their classes. In addition, most of the data is self-reported, and the students may falsely think that they have followed their own plans, even though they have not. As all notes are anonymous, there is no way of discovering whether they have actually done what they have written in their plans. Still, even if they just feel that they have managed, this may give them a positive feeling of their own competence that may result in improved motivation.

The students' evaluations indicate that the motivation sessions did not influence the learning environment much. The reason for this might be that there is an individual focus in the method, and that perhaps the method should also be applied with a focus on the learning environment – what is already good and what needs to be improved because it hinders students from learning. This would be interesting to follow up in future research.

Despite the limitations of this study, we argue that the motivation method is a universal method that is transferrable to different contexts, and that it is a useful approach to give students control over aims and learning outcomes. They are asked to reflect and give themselves credit for existing competence that could help them along the way, and they collaborate with their peers in solving challenges, setting goals and creating plans. These are important skills, and students need to develop these types of skills, and therefore we advocate the application of the motivation method in lower secondary schools. If students learn how to take control of their own lives and their own learning at an early stage in life, they may be better equipped to handle requirements and pressure higher up in the educational system and avoid becoming dropouts struggling to succeed in life. There is a great deal of pressure on young

people in the modern society we live in, and perhaps it is important for young people to remind themselves, as one of the students write:

- Remember that when I do my best, it is good enough.

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