Systematic Work with Motivation and Life Mastery Skills in Upper Secondary School: An Action Research Study from a Norwegian Context

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Abstract
Due to high drop out and falling motivation in upper secondary school, we started a project where we work with motivation and life mastery skills in the classroom. The purpose of the method is that the students are to take more responsibility of their own lives and learning process, and through this achieve increased intrinsic motivation. We applied a method where students identified what their goals were, what helps them lead towards these goals, what stops them, what they needed to focus on and how they were to carry this out. These questions were discussed in class, then the students wrote individual reflections. The method is based on Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory, stating that in order to be intrinsically motivated, the basic needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness must be met. In this study, we have analysed reflections from 79 students thematically, converting qualitative data into quantitative data presented through bar diagrams. The analyses reveal that many students experience low motivation, fear and low confidence as obstacles, and they report that they need to focus on getting more rest, concentrating in class, doing more homework and structuring their time better. A majority of the students report that they followed their plans when using this method, at least partly, so we argue that the method presented in this study may support students in developing a strategy for mastering their learning and life better, which again may result in increased motivation. For more information about the project, see
https://samm.uia.no/en/frontpage/.

Keywords: Motivation, Self-Determination, Resilience, Life Mastery

Introduction

Lack of student motivation is a significant challenge in Norwegian upper secondary school (The Norwegian Directorate of Education, 2017/2018), and according to numbers from a survey carried out in the southern region of Norway in 2016, as many as 30 % of boys and 10% of girls from socalled low-status socioeconomic background have considered dropping out of school (Berntsen, Kristiansen, Møller &Vardheim, 2016). The same survey showed that about half of the girls in this region now and then felt that everything is a struggle, and about a fourth of the boys felt the same. This "youngdata" survey, as it is called, carried out two years earlier, showed the same tendencies, that stress-related problems are common among juveniles (NOVA, 2015). One of three reported that they worried much and felt that everything was a struggle, and youngsters from low-income families report more mental health issues than other youngsters. One of the responses to the problem of dropout has been to introduce a new upper limit for absence. The new upper limit is 10 % absence, and if students exceed this limit, this leads to a fail grade. In spite of the good intentions, the new rule seems to have resulted in less absence, but paradoxically, to more fail grades in total (Ogre & Gjellan, 2017). This is the context in which the current study is carried out.

Many studies have confirmed the link between school results, employment and mental health challenges, and social benefits and disability benefits are almost only used by people who have not finished upper secondary school (Falch, Johannesen & Strøm, 2009). Hyggen and Gjerustad's studies have also shown that there is a link between struggling with mental problems and not succeeding in reaching educational goals and aspirations (2013). Another study by Furuberg and Myklebø shows that young people with most need of support from social services have not finished upper secondary school, and often they have complex challenges related to drug issues and problems with their mental health (2013). Reduced life quality is an important cause of absence due to illness and social benefits among young people (Major et al., 2011). Mental health issues also increase the risk of not succeeding with upper secondary school (Aase, Bentsen & Møller, 2015), so we might ask ourselves, what comes first? Do young people develoop mental health issues because they drop out of school, or did they drop out of school due to mental health issues? Whatever came first, all the elements mentioned here show that it is important to take young people's mental health seriously and support them to complete their eductiation to avoid the consequences of dropout.

In today's western society, young people have much freedom and there are many choices to make, which is positive. At the same time, there is an increased focus on individualisation, and everyone has to perform in order to succeed and get access to different opportunities. There are many requirements for young people, and studies show that young people experience more stress now than before and they worry about making the wrong choices (Schraml, 2013; Wigsnæs, 2015). As both national and international research shows, students also perceive school as more performance-oriented the older they get (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Patric, Kaplan & Ryan, 2011). The type of performance-oriented culture that young people report that they experience has a negative effect both on learning, motivation, mental health and the teacher-student relation (Skaalvik & Frederici, 2015). So this performance-orientation

that we experience in today's school may be the cause behind the problems in today's school described above, such as low motivation and dropout.

In general, there are many projects in school to prevent dropout and follow up students that struggle. What separates the project presented in the current study from others is that the approach applied here focuses on facilitating for student autonomy in order to enhance motivation, rather than on what different actors in the students' surroundings are to do for them. We focus on the fact that the students *themselves* own the solutions to what they can and should do to solve problems they have, and that this will help them gain increased motivation (Langeland, Horverak & Fagerhaug, 2018; Horverak, Langeland & Fagerhaug, 2018; Horverak & Aanensen, 2019; Horverak, Aanensen & Langeland, 2019; Horverak, 2020). They are to identify their own individual goals and success factors in addition to potential obstacles, so that it becomes clear what each individual student needs to do to move in the right direction. This leads us to the following research question: *How can students be supported to develop strategies that can give them increased motivation and make them take responsibility for their own lives and learning?*

To answer this question, we have carried out an intervention where we applied a method that builds on Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory (2000) and Antonovsky's healthpromoting theory. Ryan and Deci claim that in order to experience intrinsic motivation, the basic needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness must be met. The feeling of mastery is a result of experienced competence and belief that one can master different aspects and life events, what is called self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). According to Antonovsky (2012), understanding one's surroundings and believing in one's capability to handle challenges, which is equivalent to self-efficacy, are important healthpromoting factors that lead to a sense of coherence, which again enhances resilience and ability to handle stress. We believe that applying a method that combine self-determination theory and healthpromoting factors can strengthen children and young people's motivation.

For children and young people in school, the possibility of self-determination and participating in planning one's own life is necessary in order to experience autonomy, inclusion, a sense of coherence and a good learning environment. This is important for experiencing relatedness, which again may strengthen their motivation. In the method applied in this project, the students participate actively in forming their own lives through identifying what is important in life, as well as identifying obstacles and finding solutions to these. In the following, the intervention is described more in details. Then, the student reflections' are presented – what the students find to be their goals and obstacles, and what they need to focus on. Finally, we discuss the method and potential challenges and necessary adjustments.

Methodology

We define our project an action research study (Postholm, 2007) and have carried out an intervention based on the need for increased motivation in school. The intervention consisted of applying a motivation method covering four sessions (illustrated in figure 1 below), which was carried out once during the autumn semester. The students identified goals, success factors and obstacles, they chose focus areas and made action plans, and then they evaluated and adjusted their plans twice. An essential aspect of

the method is that the students write their answers anonomously, so that they dare being open and honest, also to themselves, without having as a goal to achieve external praise or criticism.
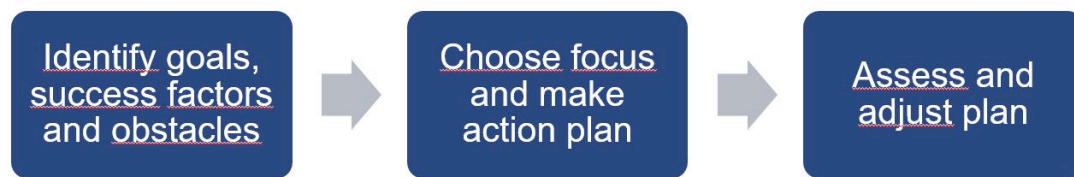

Figure 1. The motivation method

The first session of the intervention started with a discussion in plenum of the question «What does your world look like today?» Then the students were to answer the following questions: 1) What do you want to accomplish? 2) What leads towards your goals? and 3) What stops you? The students wrote anonymous answers to the questions in a book with personal codes they chose themselves instead of names. In the second session, the teacher showed examples from the students' reflections to the class, so they could see what was specific for this class, what they wanted to achieve and what stopped them from reaching their goals. Then the students were to answer the following questions: 4) What do you choose to work on? and 5) What specifically will you do to manage this? First, they discussed these questions to find solutions to obstacles together, then they wrote individual answers. In the third and fourth session, the students assessed whether they had followed their plans and they made necessary adjustments.

Sample
The selection of participating teachers and groups was based on voluntary participation and included three schools. Table 1 shows the distribution of the participating students and teachers included in the project.

Table 1 *Participants in the motivation project*

School	Teacher	Group	Participating students	Total number of students
School 1	Teacher 1	3 YFA	14	22
School 1	Teacher 2	1 STA	20	25
School 1	Teacher 2	1STM	11	18
School 2	Teacher 3	1STA	24	26
School 3	Teacher 4	3STA	10	20
Total number of students			**79**	**111**

Note. YFA = Preparatory studies for higher education after two years of vocational studies; STA = General studies; STM = General studies with specialisation in media and communication.

In total, 4 teachers and 5 groups of students participated in the project, which resulted in 79 informants. The participant number reflects how many students answered on a final questionnaire (71 % response rate), but in some sessions, more students attended. All students participating were preparing for higher education.

Results

The current study investigates how to facilitate for working with life mastery skills in the classroom, and the following analysis reveals how the motivation method applied in this project works in practice. The analyses show tendencies in students' reflections regarding goals, success factors, obstacles, chosen focus areas and actions.

When asked about their goals or what they wanted to achieve in life, many students answer job, money, studies and family (see figure 2 below). Some are concerned with achieving competence and good grades. One student expresses: "I want to marry, have two children, a nice house, become police or investigator, be happy and be able to make my children happy". This sums up many of the elements mentioned in the answers to question 1.
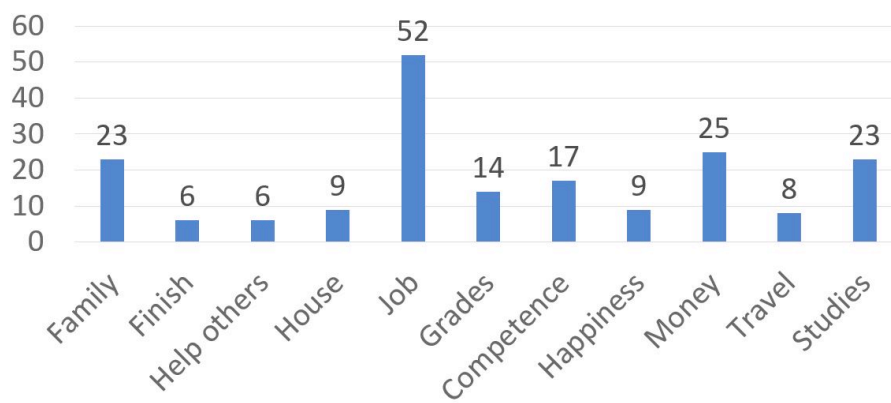

Figure 2. Goals.

On question two about success factors, the students did not understand that they were to give examples of qualities or skills they had that could help them towards their goals. Instead most of them report what they need to do, for example make an effort (55 students) and pay attention in class (14 students).

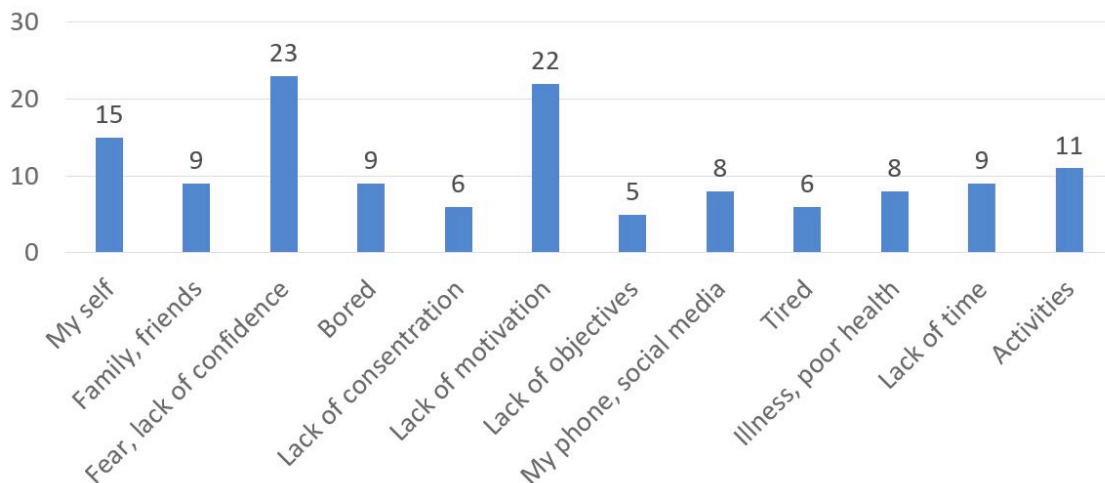When it comes to obstacles, the students give varied answers, but there are some common elements.

Figure 3. Obstacles.

As much as 23 students mention fear or lack of conficence as an obstacle, and 22 students mention lack of motivation. Fifteen students write "myself" when answering this question, and a few mention illness or poor health, lack of objectives and consentration and that they are bored. All these elements are internal factors. A minority mention more external factors such as lack of time, after school activities and friends and families as obstacles.

When asked about what they want to focus on, 27 students answer that they will try to be more focused or consentrated (figure 4 below). As much as 23 students write that they need more rest. Other important focus areas they mention are grades, homework, good education, structure, motivation. Some write that they want to decrease their screentime, be more social and follow up after school activities.
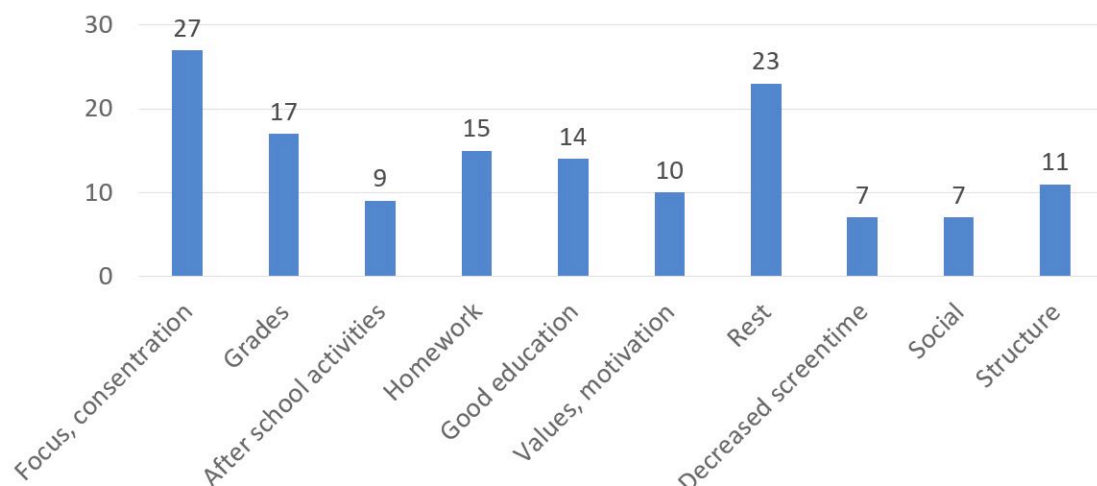
Figure 4. Focus

The students' plans for working with their individual focus areas are illustrated in figure 5 below.
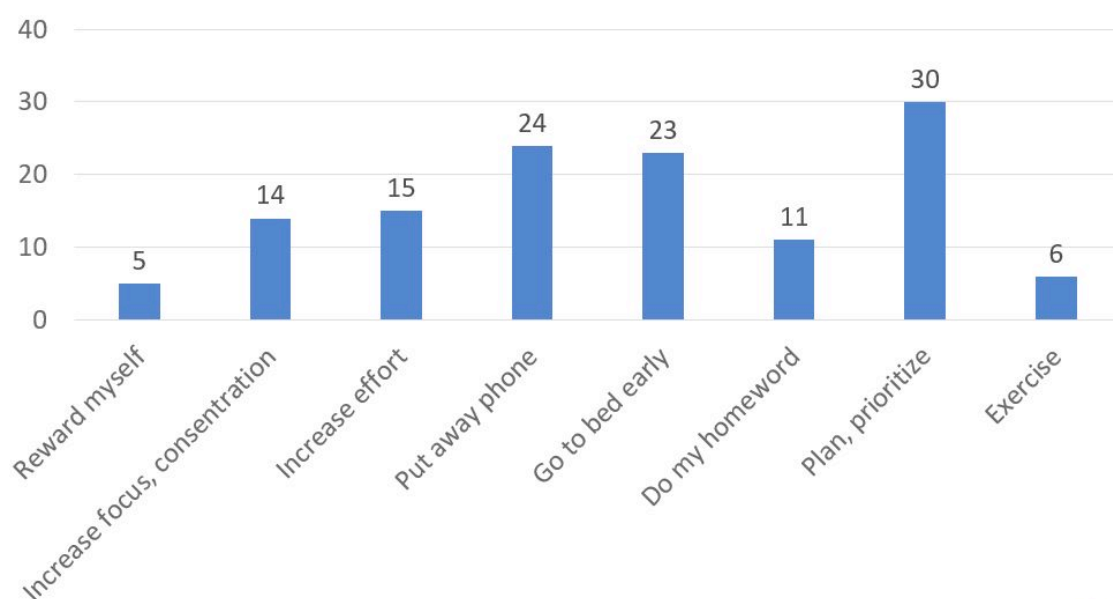
Figure 5. Action.

Thirty students say they need to make their focus a priority and plan well, 24 students write that they need to put away their phone, and 23 decide to go to bed early. Increased focus and increased effort are also mentioned as part of their plans. Others write that they will do homework, exercise and give themselves rewards.

As part of the intervention, the students assessed whether or not they followed up their plan (table 2).

Table 2. *Assessment of own follow-up, N=79.*

Time	Follows plan	Partly follows plan	Does not follow plan	Uncertain / No answer
T1	41	21	15	2
T2	41	13	18	7

Note. T1= Test 1, meaning assessment in session 3, T2= Test 2, meaning assessment in session 4.

Of the 79 participants, about half of them (41 students) followed their plans at both assessment times, and quite a few more reported that they partly followed their plan (21 students at T1, 13 students at T2).

Discussion

This study investigates how to facilitate for students developing strategies for taking responsibility of their own lives and learning. The students express obstacles such as lack of motivation, fear and low self-esteem, as well as problems with social media, boredom and exhaustion. They choose to focus on making more efforts, keeping focus, doing homework, create structure in their lives and get more rest. About half of the students that participated report that they managed to follow their own action plans, something that can be interpreted to mean that the students managed to use the motivation method. Succeeding with following own plans may make the students feel that their basic need of autonomy and competence are met, basic needs that are important in order to achieve motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

One may of course question the validity of the study, whether we can trust the results (Jacobsen, 2005), since the analysis is based on the students' own reflections and reports. The students may report that they follow their own plans, but we do not know if this is really so. Since the teacher cannot identify who has written what, it is likely that the students have written the truth, but we cannot know for certain. Independently of the students' reports, or self-assessments, the analysis of the student reflections show that they managed to describe their own situations, what was important to them, what stopped them, and what they needed to change, and also that they actively participated in planning strategies to focus on important wishes and goals.

There is a risk that this method becomes too instrumental and performance-oriented, limited to dealing with identifying goals and measures needed to reach specific goals. If this happens, there is a risk that instead of facilitating for increased motivation, the method adds to the pressure to perform, which again may result in lower motivation (Skaalvik & Frederici, 2015). Question 2 dealing with success factors is therefore significant to avoid this type of instrumental and performance-oriented thinking. It is important that the students see their own victories and experience self-

acknowledgment independently of feedback from others. Goals are often related to, and a result of, the needs of society, but maybe, in line with Antonovsky's theory (2012), a focus on what competences and capacities individuals have may contribute to increased meaningfulness and sense of coherence. Identifying resources available, in oneself or one's surroundings, may also lead to increased self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) and participation, which again leads to increased intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Concepts such as self-efficacy and motivation are also of current relevance in the new curricula for Norwegian schools, which focus on developing life mastery skills (The Norwegian Directorate of Education, 2019). It is emphasised that students are to gain competence in making responsible choices and this includes understanding and influencing factors in life, and learning to deal with success and failure and different types of challenges. This may be a response to the problems we described initally in this article, problems as dropout, mental health issues and low motivation (The Norwegian Directorate of Education, 2017/2018; Berntsen et al., 2016; Ogre & Gjellan, 2017). In line with the new core curriculum in Norwegian schools, the goal of applying the motivation method described in the current study is to strengthen the students' resilience, and to facilitate for honest identification of challenges in a safe environment, as well as planning and being an active agent in one's own life and learning. This may increase the students' life mastery skills and resilience.

One question that may arise is whether it is always the students', or the teachers' responsibility to handle different challenges that occur in the reflections. As pointed out in a report on the "youngdata" survey mentioned previously, low degree of social support may increase the risk of mental suffering (NOVA, 2015). Some of the obstacles the students mention in their reflections may be serious and sometimes the students may need help to deal with their challenges. This may also be outside of the teachers' area of competence, and it is therefore necessary with a plan for collaboration with other professionals in these types of cases. Sometimes the students can find solutions on their own, sometimes they can find solutions together with peers or with their teachers, but sometimes they may need help from other professionals, like school nurses or a psychologist perhaps. Another question is related to anonymity and how to identify students with major issues requiring instant help. In such cases the teacher along with other professionals need to find methods of identifying these students and offer necessary assistance. Living life can be compared with climbing in the mountains. Sometimes it is easy to find a way, and other times, one may need some help or guidance on the way towards one's individual or personal destination.

Conclusion

The findings presented in this study show that the motivation method presented here has potential to support students in developing strategies to take responsibility for their own lives and learning as many students seem to have benefitted from the intervention. The students report many intrinsic factors that stop them from achieving their goals, such as low motivation and low self-esteem. The most important message from this study is that we need to facilitate for young people to find their own solutions to their obstacles, and to support them in identifying what they can deal with on their own, and what perhaps needs more professional assistance.

Even though the findings are interesting, there is a need for more systematic research on the motivation method described here. This is an initial pilot study with a limited sample, and further research on the effects of the approach would complement the current study. Research on effects of this type of approach in a longterm perspective is also needed. One of the challenges with measuring effects of the approach is that the method should be adjusted to the individual groups and their needs. The implementation may therefore differ from group to group as the needs are different.

Based on the findings and reflections presented here, some adjustments in the method are needed with more focus on individual success factors, and perhaps less focus on goals to avoid a too instrumental approach. In a school infused with goal-thinking and criteria-lists for grades, it is perhaps impossible to avoid instrumental thinking. Therefore, we believe that more focus on values and success factors may be a key to make the students feel more engaged and motivated, and with new curricula in Norway, there may be possibilities to make a change in school to create an environment that facilitates for good mental health and life mastery skills.

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