

A Systematic Approach to Mastering Life – The Five-Step Motivation Method

May Olaug Horverak, Birkenes Learning Centre, Norway
Gerd Martina Langeland, Lillesand Upper Secondary School, Norway

The European Conference on Education 2022
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

‘There’s a voice in my head saying you’re not good enough, you’re stupid, you won’t manage anything’. This is a quote from a student in the current study, reporting on challenges young people attending upper secondary school face. Over years in Norway, there has been a 25 % dropout rate, and students have reported low motivation and an increasing number of mental health issues. If this is not taken seriously, there is a risk that dropout numbers will become even higher, and that more young people risk failing to become integrated in working-life and social life at an early stage of adulthood. This study presents a method that facilitates for students in upper secondary school to reflect on their own lives and how they can take charge to determine their own development in school and life in general. By identifying values, success factors and obstacles, students become aware of resources within themselves, and also in the environment, so they develop resilience to handle possible obstacles in life. Based on written reflections from students in upper secondary school, a content analysis has been carried out, showing that many of the students struggled with worries or anxiety, stress and pressure, low confidence, and negative thoughts. Evaluations of the method show that 86 % (n=51) were satisfied, 63 % felt they had become better at planning and 56 % had become more motivated. The conclusion is that the method applied in this study may support students to handle struggles in life.

Keywords: Mental Health Issues, Motivation, Health Promotion, Upper Secondary School

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Mental health challenges have been on the increase in Norway for many years. Particularly young girls at the age of 15-17 have shown an increase in psychiatric symptoms (Reneflot et al., 2018). Some of the typical problems are depression, anxiety and challenges with adjusting to different contexts. Also drop-out numbers from upper secondary school have been constant around 25 % throughout many years (Alver, 2020), in spite of efforts made to change this trend. The consequences of dropping out of school may be serious. There is a clear relation between dropping out of school and being excluded from working life (Falch et al., 2009). In addition, young people who have dropped out of school, also have an increased risk of later drug problems and mental health problems (Furuberg & Myklebø, 2013). It is therefore important, as pointed out in different government reports, to work with inclusion and health promotion in schools (Meld. St. 19 (2018-2019); Meld. St. 6 (2019-2020)), which is the concern of the approach applied in the current study.

Surveys carried out in school quite recently show a negative trend after the pandemic, as more youth report that the pandemic has influenced their lives in a negative way, particularly when it comes to social meeting points and activities (Bakken, 2021). Even before the pandemic, there was a negative trend shown in surveys. As much as 29 % of the students in upper secondary school reported that they had been depressed or unhappy the last week, and 32 % reported feeling hopelessness concerning the future (Bakken, 2018). These reports are based on questionnaires students fill in with predefined categories. In the current study, students have been given the opportunity to define themselves what their concerns and obstacles in life are. By applying a five-step method for life mastery, they have been given time and space in school to identify own values, success factors and obstacles, and one of the issues investigated in this study is what health-related issues young people perceive to be stopping them from achieving what is important to them in life and in school. Furthermore, the study investigates whether the five-step method may support students to find own resources that can help them to deal with challenges in life.

The research questions in this study are: 1) What mental health problems do upper secondary students experience? and 2) Can a systematic approach to working with life mastery support students in handling obstacles and dealing with life? To investigate this, an intervention has been carried out in upper secondary school classes, and reflections from students have been analysed and summed up. This is a limited study, and it may be difficult to generalize from the results, but it may still give some insights into a serious challenge society faces with drop-out (Alver, 2020) and increased mental health problems (Reneflot et al., 2018), and possible ways to deal with this challenge in a school context. The five-step method applied in the intervention builds on self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017), health-promoting theory (Antonovsky, 2012) and theory on self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997, 2006), which will be elaborated on below.

Theoretical foundation of the five-step method

One of the foundations of the five-step method developed in the project SAMM (2022), is self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017), stating that in order to be intrinsically motivated, one needs to experience competence, autonomy and relatedness (figure 1). Competence is closely related to experiencing mastery, and in a school context, a student needs to be able to deal with assignments, and the social context, to feel competent. If students succeed in mastering exercises in school, participating in social activities, or other

things in life, this may increase their self-efficacy, meaning their expectation to master in new situations in life (Bandura, 1997, 2006). If the opposite happens, that they do not master school or life, their self-efficacy decreases, and eventually, they may give up trying to make a change. Therefore, it is important that students experience mastery, and that teachers become aware of students' struggles and need of support. The five-step method implemented in this study is a framework for identifying students' obstacles and tuning in on their needs and motivations to facilitate for a positive development and experience of mastery.

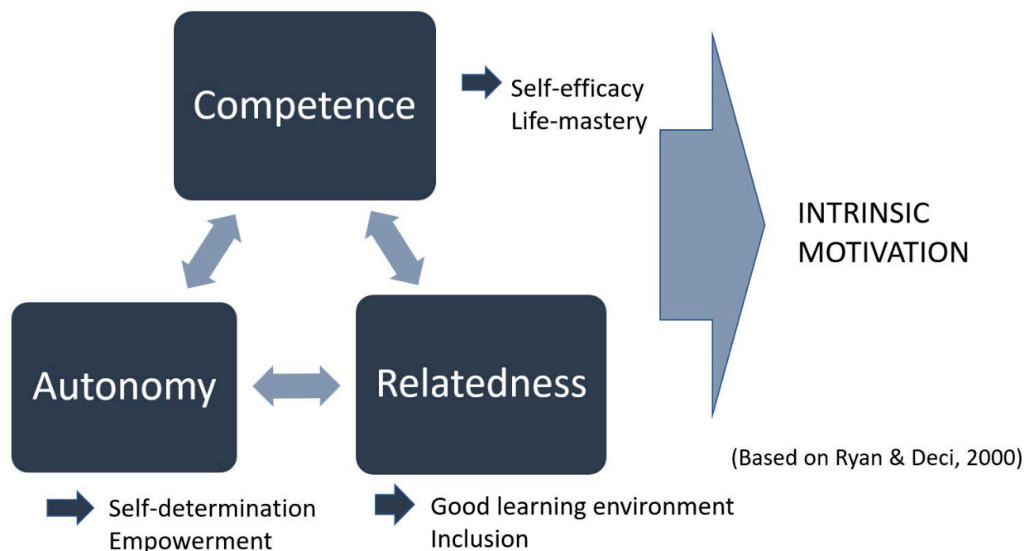


Figure 1: Self-determination theory (SAMM, 2022, based on Ryan & Deci, 2000)

The second basic need described in self-determination theory is autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017), which concerns controlling one's own life. Having autonomy means participating in making decisions that concern life, and in a school context, this concerns having an influence on the school day. Participating in making decisions supports a feeling of autonomy, which again may lead to increased motivation and better learning (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). By letting the students choose what to focus on and how to deal with difficult issues through the five-step method, they are given a possibility to take control of their own development, and decide what they want and need to work on themselves, making them agents in their own lives. Claiming agency is about taking control and plan for one's own future, and increased agency may lead to increased self-efficacy, or expectation to experiencing mastery (Bandura, 2006).

The final basic need, relatedness, is about feeling that one is part of a community, having a sense of belongingness (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017). This is about building relations, to teachers and to peers. Applying the five-step method is about building relations in class and giving acknowledgement to students and their needs. It is crucial for students to experience acknowledgement of their skills, abilities, and generally for who they are (Jordet, 2020). Some students may not always master school very well, but most people have something they are interested in, or some skills or abilities. As teacher, it is important to "dig for gold" to find the students' positive sides and acknowledge them.

The five-step approach also builds on health-promoting theory (Antonovsky, 2012), which overlaps with self-determination theory to a certain extent. According to this theory, a person needs to experience a sense of coherence (SOC) to deal with stress in life, and a sense of coherence is achieved through experiencing comprehensibility, manageability and

meaningfulness (figure 2). According to this theory, having a sense of coherence contributes to develop resilience to deal with stress in life.

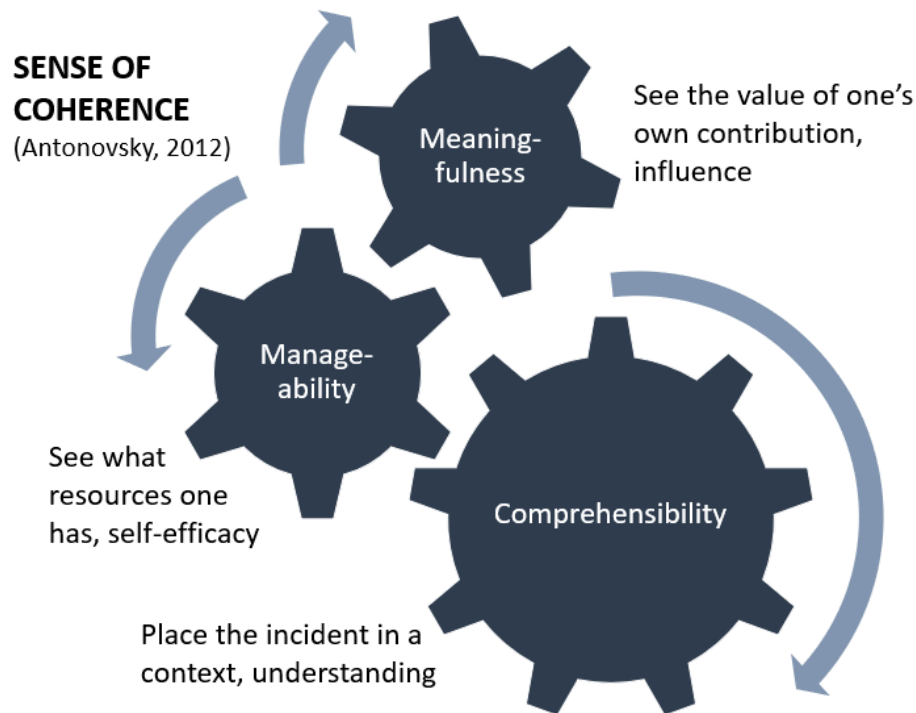


Figure 2: Antonovsky's salutogenic theory (SAMM, 2022, based on Antonovsky, 2012)

Comprehensibility is about understanding situations and placing incidents that occur in a context. Manageability is about seeing what resources one has available, and this overlaps with having a feeling of competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017) and self-efficacy, meaning an expectation to master situations (Bandura, 1997, 2006). In addition, Antonovsky (2012) adds the element of meaningfulness in his theory, claiming that to experience a sense of coherence, it is necessary to see the value of contributing. This is about feeling that one can make a change, and influence development. Without meaningfulness, there is no motivation, so meaningfulness is pointed out as the most important element in the theory. To activate students' experience of meaningfulness, the first question they are asked in the five-step method concerns what is important to them. In the following, the SAMM-approach will be described more in detail, as well as research methodology in general.

Methodology

This study includes both qualitative and quantitative data, making it a mixed-method approach (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The qualitative data includes students' reflections from an intervention with a five-step method for mastery, participation and motivation (Langeland & Horverak, 2021), carried out in several upper secondary school classes. The material has been analysed through a summative, traditional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The quantitative data was collected through a questionnaire. The students filled in an evaluation form with different claims concerning the five-step method and crossed out on a 5-point Likert-scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. They evaluated whether they were satisfied with the method and whether they had become more motivated and better at planning and finding solutions in difficult situations.

The intervention included four sessions spread over a term, with focus on how to master life, based on methodology developed in the project SAMM (2022). In the first session, two metaphors for mastering life were presented, and the first of these is a mountain (figure 3).



Figure 3: Life is like climbing in the mountain (from Langeland & Horverak, 2021)

Living is compared with climbing in the mountain. Sometimes, when standing at the foot of the mountain, the top may seem distant and impossible to reach. If one examines the mountain closer, and from different sides, one may find a way up. This compares with life. Sometimes everything seems impossible, and all hope may be lost. What is important is not to give up, but instead try to see life from different perspectives, and try to find a way to move forwards.

The second metaphor presented in class was two different stairs, and applying the five-step method is compared with climbing the stairs (figure 4). The students were asked how they felt about life and school, whether it was like the stairs to the left with a too large step, that everything felt hopeless and too difficult, or whether it was like the stairs to the right, that everything felt okay and doable. After class discussions, it was explained that the five-step method is about making the stairs appropriate, and taking one step at the time, by focusing on what is possible to change and improve in life with some efforts.

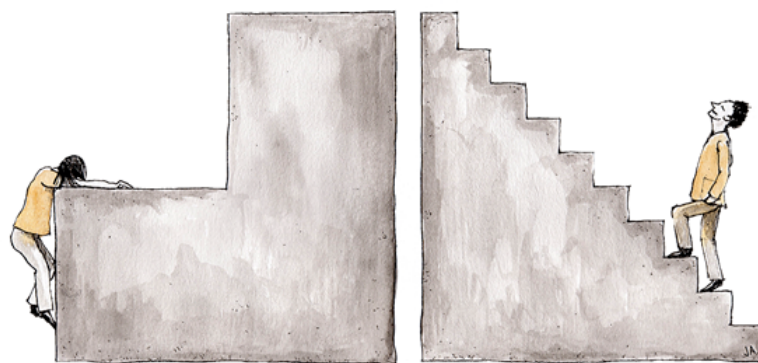


Figure 4: The life stairs (from Langeland & Horverak, 2021)

After introducing the two metaphors, the teachers started working with the first three steps in the five-step method (figure 5). The students discussed 1) what is important in life and school, 2) what skills they have and what they are satisfied with in life, and 3) what is difficult in life, that may stop them from achieving what is important for them. After a class discussion, the students wrote individual answers to the same questions in anonymous log

books that the teacher then collected, and these books were coded with numbers only the students themselves knew. The students' answers on question three, about obstacles, is the qualitative material analysed in this study.

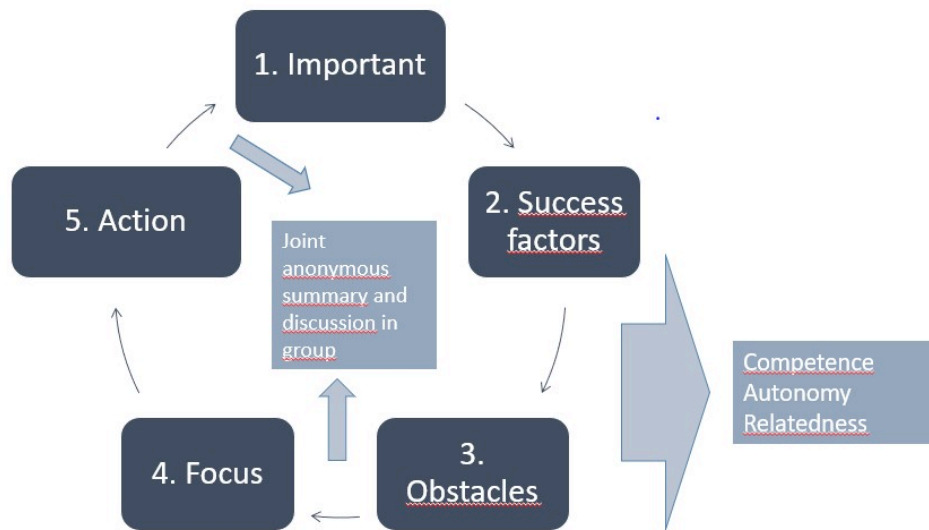


Figure 5. The five-step method (published in Horverak & Aanensen, 2019; Horverak, 2020).

In session two of the intervention, the teacher presented anonymous examples of answers from the students' logbooks to the class, and this was followed up with a discussion on how to deal with the mentioned obstacles to achieve what was important. The students came up with suggestions on what to focus on, and what specifically they could do to deal with different challenges. After the discussion, the students retrieved their logbooks, and wrote answers to the questions in step four and five of the method, making an action plan: 4) what will you focus on? and 5) what specifically will you do to manage this? The teachers then collected the books again.

In session three, the students were given examples of different action plans and discussed whether they could add more strategies or whether they needed to change to a new focus area. The students retrieved their logbooks, and evaluated whether they had followed their plans, and then adjusted or wrote new action plans, answering the last two questions in the five-step approach. This procedure was repeated in session four, and the students also evaluated the intervention in this session.

The sample includes 70 students in total from five different upper secondary school classes (response rate: 91 %). There is one general studies class and four vocational classes, of which two were Children and youth, one was Health and care and one was Restaurant and food processing. Logbooks from all students are included in the analysis. Due to absence, only 51 students filled in the evaluation form (response rate = 62 %).

Results

Results of the summative, traditional content analysis answer the research question of what health-related problems upper secondary school students experience. A variety of mental health issues were identified through the analysis (table 1, n = 70). Both the number of

students who reported on different challenges is included in the analysis, and the number of occurrences in total.

Obstacles	Number of occurrences	Number of students
Anxiety, fear	7	6
Worries, uncertainty	22	10
Stress, pressure, too little time	39	15
Afraid of / concerned with what others think	10	6
Bad mood, angry	5	3
Low self-confidence, bad self-image	20	12
Heavy thoughts, overthinking, negative thoughts, crying, guilt	19	15
Specific mention of mental health issues or diagnosis	20	12
Low/lack of motivation	45	25
Self-critical, not happy about oneself	33	12
Negative influence from people (friends, family, teachers, peers)	23	11
Exhausted, out of energy	23	19
Sleeping problems	54	21
Mobile phone use	49	24
Digital media in general	22	8

Table 1: Results of content analysis of students' obstacles

The students reported on issues such as anxiety, fear, worries and uncertainty. They also experienced stress and pressure, and some were exhausted and out of energy. Some were concerned with what others may think, and some had a low self-confidence, or bad self-image. Students struggled with heavy thoughts, bad mood, and self-critical thoughts, as described in this quote: 'There's a voice in my head saying you're not good enough, you're stupid, you won't manage anything'. They also reported that they were negatively influenced by others, and that mobile phone use and digital media in general were problematic. Sleeping problems and other specific diagnosis were also described.

To answer the second research question of whether a systematic approach to working with life mastery can support students in handling obstacles and dealing with life, the students' answers to the evaluation form are presented (table 2, n = 51).

Evaluation claims	Agree
Satisfied with the method	86%
Become better at planning	63%
Become more motivated	56%
Become better at finding solutions	47%

Table 2: Results of evaluations of the five-step method

The evaluations show that 86 % of the students agreed that they were satisfied with the method, 63 % agreed that they had become better at planning, 56 % had become more motivated and 47 % had become better at finding solutions in difficult situations. One student wrote about learning problems, and reflected on own development: 'Dyslexia is both my weakness and strength. It depends on how I see it. When I look back, I can see all the challenges I have had, and see that I tried my best and managed to handle things'.

Discussion

The analysis of students' obstacles related to health issues confirms the image drawn based on surveys and reports concerning mental health problems (Bakken, 2018, 2021; Reneflot et al., 2018). The students reported on problems with anxiety, stress, motivation, self-image and more. They also described mobile phones and digital media as problems, and there may be a connection between these different types of problems. The image of successful young people presented in media may add to the stress young people feel, and influence their self-image in a negative way. The increase of mental health issues may be related to the increased use of technological devices, and the creation of an 'ideal monster' that gives them a utopian and unrealistic view on what success is (Langeland & Horverak, 2021, figure 6).

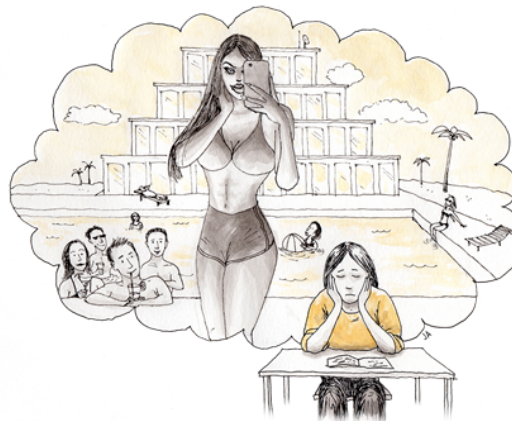


Figure 6: The 'ideal monster' (from Langeland & Horverak, 2021)

Starting a joint process in class, deconstructing this monster, may help students feel less alone with their challenging feelings, and facilitate for finding motivation to deal with what is difficult in life. Investigating what is important in life, and finding one's own resources to work towards personal goals may lead to a sense of coherence, where one finds meaning, and believes in own abilities to handle stressful situations (Antonovsky, 2012). There may be serious mental health challenges that are revealed when working with this approach, and perhaps the students need professional help to find a way to cope with life. In these cases, the teacher may give information about available help, for example the school nurse, and sometimes the teacher must try to identify students with serious problems and help them seek help in the health care system. The students should not always be left on their own to solve problems they have.

The results of the evaluations show that many students experience the five-step approach as useful to plan, solve difficulties and find motivation. Applying the approach is a way of giving autonomy-support, and previous studies have confirmed the link between autonomy-support on the one side, and intrinsic motivation, perceived competence, self-esteem and decreased anxiety on the other side (Ryan & Deci, 2020). By identifying resources, both personal skills and abilities, and resources in the environment, such as a good friend or a teacher, the students may dare to take agency in their own lives. This means that they take control of their own development, which again may lead to increased mastery and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997, 2006).

The current study is limited both in sample and duration of the intervention. It may be difficult to generalise based on the findings here, but still, the results show that there is a

potential in the five-step method that is worth further investigation. In addition, the approach described builds on well-established theory of self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017), health-promotion (Antonovsky, 2012) and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997, 2006). Other studies related to the same project SAMM have also shown similar tendencies concerning the usefulness of the approach (Horverak & Aanensen, 2019; Horverak, 2020; Horverak, Langeland & Aanensen, 2020). Still, there is a need for a more longitudinal investigation to explore the potential of the SAMM-approach further. It would also be interesting to look more closely at which students benefit from the approach, who does not benefit, and why.

Conclusion

This study confirms that young people struggle with many mental issues, such as anxiety, worries, heavy thoughts, sleeplessness and low self-image, and it describes a systematic approach to working with life mastery in classes that may support the students in dealing with life. Even though upper secondary school is much about preparing students for university studies, or about developing skills for future jobs, it is important to take young people's mental health seriously. One way of doing this is by bringing real life into class, as described in the approach presented here, giving time and space to stop and reflect on important issues in life.

Acknowledgements

We want to thank our SAMM-collaborators in Norway for inspiring collaboration. This project has been financed by the Norwegian Directorate of Health and the Agder County through the programme Health-promoting Kindergartens and Schools.

References

- Alver, V. (2020). *Lærerrommet: frafall i videregående, hva skal vi gjøre?* Utdanningsforbundet.
<https://www.utdanningsforbundet.no/nyheter/2020/larerrommet-frafall-i-videregaende-hva-skal-vi-gjore/>
- Antonovsky, A. (2012). *Helsens mysterium: Den salutogene modellen. [Unraveling the mystery of health: The salutogenic model]*. Gyldendal.
- Bakken, A. (2018). *Ungdata 2018. Nasjonale resultater* (NOVA Rapport 8/18).
<http://www.hioa.no/Om-OsloMet/Senter-for-velferds-og-arbeidslivsforskning/NOVA/Publikasjoner/Rapporter/2018/Ungdata-2018.-Nasjonale-resultater>
- Bakken, A. (2021) *Ungdata 2021. Nasjonale resultater* (NOVA Rapport 8/21).
<https://oda.oslomet.no/oda-xmlui/handle/11250/2767874>
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. Freeman.
- Bandura, A. (2006). Adolescent development from an agentic perspective. I F. Pajares & T. Urdan (Red.), *Self-efficacy beliefs of adolescents* (pp. 1–43). Information Age Publishing.
- Falch, T., Johannesen, A. B. & Strøm, B. (2009). *Kostnader av frafall i videregående opplæring*. <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/kostnader-av-frafall-i-videregaende-oppl/id589823/>
- Furuberg, J. & Myklebø, S. (2013). *Unges tilknytning til arbeidslivet* (NAV-rapport 2013:1). NAV.
- Horverak, M. O. & Aanensen, M. (2019). Decreased motivation and increased mental illness among young people – a need for teaching life mastery skills in school. *The 7th European Conference on Education, Independence & Interdependence, official conference proceedings*, (pp. 239-251).
<https://papers.iafor.org/submission52464/>
- Horverak, M. O. (2020). Developing resilience and life mastery skills in the classroom – a multiple case study comparing a Norwegian and Peruvian context. *The 5th IAFOR International Conference on Education – Hawaii2020 Official conference proceedings*, (pp. 31-44). <https://papers.iafor.org/submission53632/> Madsen, O. J. (2020). Livsmestring på timeplanen: Rett medisin for elevene? Spartacus Forlag.
- Horverak, M. O., Langeland, G. M. & Aanensen, M. (2020). Systematic work with motivation and life mastery skills in upper secondary school: An action research study from a Norwegian context. *The 8th European Conference on Education – London 2020 Official conference proceedings*, s. 65-76.
<https://papers.iafor.org/submission57545/>

- Hsieh, H.- F. & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), 1277-1288.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>
- Jordet, A. N. (2020). *Anerkjennelse i skolen: En forutsetning for læring*. Cappelen Damm Akademisk.
- Meld. St. 6 (2019-2020). Tett på – tidlig innsats og inkluderende fellesskap i barnehage, skole og SFO. Kunnskapsdepartementet.
<https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/meld.-st.-6-20192020/id2677025/>
- Meld. St. 19 (2018-2019). Folkehelsemeldinga - Gode liv i eit trygt samfunn. Hentet fra
<https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/meld.-st.-19-20182019/id2639770/>
- Reneflot, A., Aarø, L. E., Aase, H., Reichborn-Kjennerud, T., Tambs, K. Øverland, S. (2018). Psykisk helse i Norge. Folkehelseinstituttet.
https://www.fhi.no/globalassets/dokumenterfiler/rapporter/2018/psykisk_helse_i_norge2018.pdf
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68-78.
- Ryan, R. M. & Deci, E. L. (2017). Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness. The Guilford Press.
- Ryan, R. M. & Deci, E. L. (2020). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation from a self-determination theory perspective: Definitions, theory, practices, and future directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 61, 101860.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2020.101860>
- SAMM. (2022). A systematic approach to mastering life - <https://samm.uia.no/en/about-the-project/>
- Skaalvik, E. M. & Skaalvik, S. (2018). Skolen som læringsarena: Selvoppfatning, motivasjon og læring (3. utg.). Universitetsforlaget.

Contact email: may.olaug.horverak@birkenes.kommune.no