

## Dropout in VET – institutional selection and social exclusion

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## Dropout in vocational education – institutional selection and social exclusion

### 1. What kind of problem is dropout?

For the last fifteen years drop out of vocational education has increased significantly in Denmark. Only half of the students, who took up a vocational programme on upper secondary level in 2008, complete it. The lowest retention rates are found in the first school based basic course (½ - 2 year) that precede the three year work based main course in a training placement. In Denmark, like in other European countries, the low completion rate has raised considerable concern on the political level (Jørgensen 2011; Lamb & Mar-kussen 2011). Three reasons are given for considering the high dropout rates a serious problem for policy-makers. Firstly, due to the globalisation process many low skilled job are outsourced and few employment opportunities will be open for low skilled people. Secondly, labour market forecast point to a severe deficit of skilled workers in the coming years. And thirdly, education is considered to be decisive for social integration and prevention of social problems. For this reason the government has set a target for getting 95% of a youth group to complete a post-compulsory programme in 2015. Continuing high dropout rates will make it very hard to reach this target and the government has launched a series of measures to increase retention including the obligation for all vocational colleges to make plans for retention and to supervise the students more closely.

This paper builds on a part study that forms part of a larger research project over the period 2009-12 on retention in the Danish VET. It combines qualitative and quantitative methods in an advanced mixed method research design and some first results are published in Danish (Jørgensen 2011). This paper study draws on the author's participation in a review of research on dropout in the Nordic countries (Jørgensen 2010) and field work including classroom observations and interviews with more than 50 students and 8 teachers from seven programmes in two vocational colleges. Some of the students have been reinterviewed over a period of 1½ year in order to map the processes of dropout and retention. It should be noted that there are considerable differences between the various programmes especially the technical and the business programmes. The paper, though, will examine some common issues of selection and exclusion across the various programmes to shed light on how the dropout process in VET takes place. The objective is to provide more detailed and qualified knowledge of dropping out as an accumulative and contingent

process that often depends on the interplay of multiple contributory factors (Alexander a.o. 2001; Finn 1989; Furlong & Cartmel 1997; Hodkinson & Bloomer 2001). This knowledge can hopefully improve the relevance and efficiency of the measures taken to increase retention in VET.

A dominant tradition in research on retention has focused on individual risk factors in the students social background (Lamb and Markussen 2011; Rumberger 2004). In line with this tradition another part of the Danish research project on retention in VET has established detailed knowledge of the multiple social background that contribute to increase the risk of dropping out based on extensive register studies (Jensen & Humlum 2009). This includes a low level of education and low income of parents, living with a single parent and coming from an ethnic minority background. Just as the risk of dropping out depends on the social background, dropout in itself also contributes to social risk in the future. People who dropout and never complete any post compulsory education have a significantly higher risk of unemployment, a low income and a higher frequency of health problems (Andersen 2005; Jensen & Jensen 2005). Though these increased risks are not a result of dropout, it is well documented that dropout adds to other factors that increases the risk of marginalisation on the labour market and a lower quality of life (Lamb and Markussen 2011).

The focus in research on individuals' backgrounds, though, might support a problematic but common conception of drop out as a result of individual deficits. This focus might lead to measures focussing narrowly on '*youth-at-risk*', rather than considering the broader social dynamics that are involved in producing dropout. These include processes of exclusion from the social communities of students and the selection processes involved in the students' transitions through various educational pathways. In addition, the search for discrete causal factors behind dropout might obscure the complex and contingent processes that result in dropout. Dropout might be triggered by specific events, but is generally a result of an accumulative process that often has started early in basic school (Alexander, a.o. 2001).

The present study aims to understand dropout as a result of the interplay of students' agency, their participation in learning communities in vocational programmes and their handling of the opportunities and risks in the different courses, programmes and pathways of the educational system (Hodkinson a.o. 2007; Hodkinson and Bloomer 2001). The study draw attention to a number of separate, but interconnected dimensions of the dropout process: firstly, the *institutional selection* process that include the separation of students in classes at different levels, assessment through tests and exams, sanctioning of absence and late-coming, giving attention and recognition to students or ignoring them, categorising and positioning students as bright or inattentive or as immigrants, boys and girls, expelling them from individual lessons or from the college. Secondly, we study the social and cultural processes of *in- and exclusion* from the students' social communities inside and outside college. Thirdly, we examine the *market based selection* caused by the skills requirements of the labour market and the students' competition on the market for training placements. Lastly, we will use the term *self-selection* to understand dropout as a meaningful action of young people that results from the students' handling of risks, choices and insecurities related to the transition process. The paper is based on initial analyses and the results should be regarded as preliminary.

## **2. Dropout and selection in the Danish dual system**

In many ways the Danish education system is similar to the education systems elsewhere in Scandinavia: a comprehensive, public system characterised by an egalitarian and inclusive tradition. This relates to the

common type of welfare state that provides universal public support to limit the risks for young people in the transition from education to the labour market (Raffe, 2008). This support takes form of career guidance, state education grants and activation of unemployed youth through education. Andreas Walther (2006 :Table 2) describes the Danish education system as "non-selective" and Niemeyers (2007:p. 126) refers to the Scandinavian vocational education and training programmes collectively as a "school-based system". These descriptions, however, ignore important differences between the transition systems in the Scandinavian countries (Olofson 2008). While Sweden has a purely school-based system, Denmark has a dual system of vocational education, which in many ways resembles the German system. Both countries have a two-track education system consisting of general upper secondary education on the one hand and vocational education and training on the other.

The dual system in Denmark represents a modernised form of apprenticeship, where work-based learning makes up two thirds of the total training period of typically four years. Despite a strong growth in the general programmes of upper secondary education since the 1970s, the vocational programmes continue to recruit approximately one third of a youth cohort. The dual system provides an effective transition to employment with a low risk of unemployment and a high rate of employment (Gangl 2001; Müller 2005; Jørgensen 2008). This is in part due to the fact that the students during their training acquire specific competences that are valued and recognised in the labour market, as well as to the fact that the vocational programmes are structured as sandwich courses that involve a gradual transition to regular employment as an integral part of the programme (Wolbers 2007; Breen 2005). In Denmark around half of the vocational students in the dual system continue their employment in the training company after completing the training contract of typically four years.

However, the downside to the two-track education system is the uneven social selection to the two tracks. There are major differences between the educational backgrounds of parents of students in the Gymnasiums (general upper secondary schools) and parents of students in the vocational colleges. Studies in the present research project show that in the vocational colleges the share of students with parents who haven't completed any post compulsory education is two times the share of similar students in the Gymnasiums. At the same time, compared to vocational colleges, there are four times as many students in the Gymnasiums with parents who have higher education qualifications (Jensen & Larsen 2011; Jæger & Holm 2007). In addition students who start a VET course have far lower chance of enrolment in higher education than students in upper secondary schools, and this indicates that the social inequality in education is sustained by the tracking of the higher secondary level of education (Hanushek & Wößmann 2006). The uneven recruitment to the two tracks means that students in VET have fewer educational resources than students in general upper secondary education. This social selection is one of the main causes of the high dropout rate in VET compared to the Gymnasiums, since it is well documented that a low socio-economic position of parents is a significant risk factor for dropout (Jensen & Larsen 2011).

Nonetheless, the two-track system does have certain positive qualities with respect to socialisation and integration into the labour market (Gangl 2001). The independent system of work based training programmes of VET offers young people who are less academically minded an attractive route to employment. The dual system in Denmark functions not only has a role as a safety net for students who are less academic, the dual system is chosen by many young people as an attractive path to employment. However, at

the same time the tracking of higher secondary education reinforces social selection with regard to participation in higher education (Shavit & Müller 2000). Social selection occurs not only during the transition from compulsory basic school to the two tracks of higher secondary education. The growing dropout rate in VET programmes indicates that increasingly social selection happens within the VET programmes in the processes that result in a division between students who complete their course and students who drop out.

Three decades ago a decisive social selection took place after the completion of the basic school at the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, when more than a quarter of a youth group went directly onto the labour market (Ørum 1981). Over the years an increasing number of students are continuing in education after completion of compulsory education: today 96% of all young people start an education programme at higher secondary level. However, at the same time, less than half of all young people who start on a VET programme in Denmark actually complete their course. Dropout rates have been rising steeply since the mid-1990s (Munk 2011; MoE 2009:71). Very few young people enter the labour market directly after the compulsory level and it has become the norm among young people from all social strata to continue in higher secondary education. Nonetheless, the proportion of students who do not complete an education programme has remained overall unchanged since 1995 despite the fact that there have been many initiatives to reduce this so-called remainder group. More young people now embark on a secondary education course, yet a greater number drop out. This indicates that a bigger part of the social selection has moved inside the VET programmes and that the selection takes place in the division between students who complete the programme and those who drop out. In the light of this development, it is important to examine the processes that result in students dropping out of vocational education despite the official goals and the extensive efforts of the government and VET schools to ensure that everyone completes an educational program at higher secondary level.

### **3. Efforts to counteract students dropping out from VET programmes**

The strong political interest in reducing the dropout rate in VET programmes has primarily focussed on the students who drop out in order to find out what characterises this group. This effort is meant to make it easier to interpret the signs when a student is not faring well and to take measures to increase the support for a student to complete his or her course. However, it also means that dropping out is put down to the students' deficits and problems: their lacking discipline and skills or their messy family circumstances. As a result, the effort to reduce the dropout rate is focused on compensatory measures to support the "weak", "vulnerable" or "deviant" students. This means that the dropout problem is becoming individualised and attributed to the students, who are to be helped through special measures. This is particularly evident in VET schools, where countless special measures have been implemented to support this group of students: mentors, coaches, advisers, counsellors and social pedagogical measures. However this can prevent the dropout problem from being attributed to and dealt with in other areas: teaching, class sizes, teachers' competence, education policy, shortage of placements – or the social deprivation and problems that are documented to increase the risk of drop out.

A shift from placing the dropout problem with the individual students to placing it with the educational system is particularly relevant in the case of the VET programmes. Their structure has certain inherent characteristics which increase the risk of students dropping out. The first of such characteristics is that VET programmes are based on training in companies, and the availability of placements greatly depends on the state of the economy. For this reason, the problem of training places has been one of the most important

causes of dropout rates since 1972, since which time students have been allowed to start a course without having secured a training contract with a company in advance (Sørensen et al. 1993). The students' insecurity concerning their access to a training placement reduces their engagement in the course and a significant number of students discontinue their basic training. This kind of dropout is in the most cases not in itself problematic, since the majority of students switch to another basic training course, in some instances after they have spent some time in the labour market. Almost every fourth student who starts basic training has previously attended another course and this has helped them to become more determined on their choice of program. But some dropout several times, and analysis of register data has shown that shifts by themselves do increase the risk of never completing any post-16 program (Jensen & Larsen 2010). Another inherent risk lies in the dual-system structure of VET programs. In addition to the transition from lower secondary school to vocational college, the dual system involves yet another transition from the school-based basic course to the work-based main course of training in a company. While students in the Gymnasiums normally stay in the same class group and in the same environment for three years, VET students have to change their social environment after six months to two years. These transitions mean risky shifts in status involving a change in social environment and a heightened dropout risk (Heinz 2001). A third risk inherent in VET programmes is the double pressure on the students arising from both the demands of policy makers and of the labour market. Policy has succeeded in making almost every youth enrol in a post compulsory program. This means that at one end of a VET programme is a significant group of academically weak students start the basic school-based training. At the other end of the ½ - 2 year course the students have to get hold of a training contract with a company, which generally makes high demands on their apprentices' social skills and knowledge. A significant number of students have poor prerequisites for entering a workplace, including some who start a VET course because they have no choice. Schools and teachers are thus faced with a dichotomy in that they have to accommodate these students' needs on the one hand, and, on the other, have to send qualified students to companies that have high demands with regard to efficiency, quality and competence. This dichotomy results in tensions inside the vocational colleges between the most committed and engaged students and the most uncommitted students. In addition it results in teachers tolerating a group of uncommitted students in the classes, while concentrating on the most committed and especially on those who have a training contract. The dichotomy serves to widen the gap between education policy rhetoric and schools' official policy, and the reality which teachers and students experience on the ground with regard to the basic school-based training. This policy context will be explored in the following.

#### **4. The policy context of dropout in vocational education**

The present political interest for the dropout problem could indicate that it is a new problem in vocational education. A historical study (Jørgensen 2011) shows, though, that it has been a travelling companion since the first law on apprenticeship in 1889. Here it was stipulated that *"When an apprentice has left the apprenticeship without justified reasons, he can be brought back by the police if the master in 14 days makes a petition of this"* (§13). This legal provision was introduced to guarantee to the employers that the effort invested in training a new apprentice in the first period would be compensated by the benefits of the productive work of the apprentice in the last part of the training period. Though dropout today is no longer a matter for the police the last 15 years has seen a growth in the demands by public authorities on all young people to either be in employment, training or education. This is expressed in the norm, which has become more common throughout society, that compulsory schooling is not enough. But it is also articulated in the

active labour market policy that was implemented from 1993 onwards (Møller & Lind & Hansen 2008). As a consequence the period of eligibility for social security has been shortened, and the demands on unemployed youth to be in education or training have become tightened (Andersen & Svarer 2007).

The last measure from 2010 made it possible for social authorities to sanction financially parents of a child who do not comply with the personal educational plan that all young people have to work out in the last classes of the basic school. This and other measures are part of the political efforts to make 95 % of a youth group complete a post compulsory programme of education. This contributes to a very low youth unemployment in Denmark compared to the rest of Europe. But at the same time a significant share of the students who enter the basic courses in the vocational colleges do this without being very committed. This is quite likely one of the reasons why the rate of dropout in vocational education has grown since the middle of the 1990s, though no clear evidence on this is available. The general picture shows that a growing share of each youth cohort has taken up post compulsory education, and at the same time a larger share has been dropping out.

For students to be coerced or directly forced into an educational programme or to be unclear or ambivalent about their choice does not necessarily imply that they will drop out. The process of making educational choices today is much more open and reversible than earlier (Antikainen & Kaupilla 2002). The formal educational opportunities available for young people today are much more abundant, and at the same time the educational experiences of the parents are less useful due to the rapid changes on the labour market and in the educational system.

As a consequence many students start a vocational programme as an act of trying out the opportunities in the educational system and testing their own interests and abilities (Brown a.o. 2011). Many students develop an interest and engagement and a vocational identity especially during the training placement, where they interact with adults and can get recognition in a community of skilled employees. But many others don't get engaged and after a while drop out or shift to another programme. The main reason for choosing a vocational programme given by students themselves in two large surveys is their interest in the occupation. And the reason given for dropping out as well is that they have lost the interest in the programme (DCUM 2006; Brown a.o. 2011). And most of the students who drop out don't consider it as something negative or as a failure. They have tested their interests and learned what in kind of occupational programme they do not want to stay on. And most of them shift to another programme and maybe yet another – but eventually complete one. But a minority of students never complete any program and their progressive disengagement in education is at the core of the dropout problem.

The act of dropping out of vocational education cannot adequately be seen as only a negative and stigmatising occurrence as is often the case in the political discourse. In this discourse dropout means increased costs for extended school to work transitions and a risk of scarcity of skilled labour in the future. According to this economic interest young people should take the direct path through the educational system and complete their studies in the shortest time possible. But in the lives of individual students dropping out of education can have many diverse meanings and consequences (Hodkinson & Bloomer 2001). It seems more reasonable to examine the increasing dropout rate as part of a new pattern of extended school to work transitions where a significant share of young people don't follow a linear trajectory from school to work, but instead try out a number of different opportunities before they complete a programme and enter the labour market. This means that it makes sense not to focus too much on dropout, but to consider the opportunities for re-entry in the educational system (Evans & Niemeyer 2004). In addition young people's choices and preferences are often more guided by the pursuit of personal interests and the quest for some-

thing that they feel is meaningful than by economic goals or employment security (Dwyer & Wyn 2001). As a consequence research should be careful, firstly, to consider for whom dropout is a problem and what kind of dropout is a problem and, secondly, to distinguish between the individual occurrence of a dropout and the accumulative process of leaving the educational system permanently.

### 5. Individualisation of the dropout problem

There is a growing diversity of students in Danish VET with regard to their age, ethnicity, engagement, prior learning and educational attainment. At the same time many young people show less devotion to the duties of work of earlier generations and have higher expectations for work and education to be personally meaningful and engaging (Dwyer & Wyn 2001). In the 1990s the 'increasing individualisation' of youth was seen as the major reason for the growing drop out problem of vocational colleges. The diagnosis was that the standardised courses and fixed pathways of the dual system did not match the growing diversity among the students. This thesis of individualisation of youth formed background to a radical institutional individualisation.

The reform in year 2000 entailed the introduction of the so-called 'personal education plan' that gives a broader scope of opportunities for choice of subjects and flexible organisation of content and duration of the school based basic course. At the same time it became possible in many colleges to start at any time during the year. Earlier the colleges only started new classes once or twice a year, and thus dropouts had to wait and maybe become disengaged. The intention of the reform was *"that the increased opportunities for adjusting the programmes to the individual requirements of the students will make the voc programmes more attractive and reduce dropout"* (MoE 2001). In cooperation with the college each individual student should draw up a personal education plan that would tailor the program to their interests and requirements. Instead of directing students with learning disabilities to special programmes they should be offered relevant tailor-made courses inside the main programme. This was introduced in connection with a shift in the pedagogical thinking in the direction of a more student centred form of teaching. The students were expected to take a greater responsibility for their own learning processes and their personal education plan. Policy though was not consistent or uniform in this area. As described above, the active labour market policy increasingly made it an obligation for all young people to be in education, training or employment. But since access to employment and training placements has become restricted, taking up a basic course in vocational college was the only choice left.

In the years following the reform the intentions of reducing the dropout were not fulfilled. One reason for this was that the flexible and individualised courses weakened the social relations of the classes and raised the requirements on the individual student to hold on to his or her education plan. The committed students could benefit from the flexible structure, but students who were less engaged or unclear about their interests got less support from a stable peer group and a fixed course plan. Many stakeholders in and around the dual system claimed that as a result of the flexible and individualised courses there was an increase in the dropout rate, and this was confirmed by the official statistics and research (Koudahl 2005). I will give example from my interview with a 17 year old boy who completed his basic course in a mechanic programme with flexible intake, but then dropped out and was employed in a supermarket as I interviewed him the second time a year later.

*"We entered this 32 week course and it was all chaos, because we were thrown into a class that was already running. So, they were twelve weeks ahead of us. So we were far behind, but we were told that what*



*they had learned, we would get that later on. So we were just to follow up on what they'd had. But they had almost completed, so we weren't with them for a long time. So at the same time as we should learn those things, we had to learn new people (...) and that was very hard."*

A bit later he tells that he had to shift to yet another class before he completed, and of the 25 students that started this course, only eight completed. Most likely those who completed were the most self-reliable and committed students, who were able to hold on to their own plans and to a group of fellow students to support them. And those who dropped out were most likely the less committed students that the reform aimed at retaining in the programme. The chance of completing came to depend more on the informal processes of in- and exclusion in the social groups and communities of students.

Another consequence of the reform was that the main responsibility for the dropout problem shifted from the college and the teacher to the students, since the students had been given considerable responsibility for designing their own educational plan and holding on to it. The institutional selection of students by the college and the teachers was to some degree replaced by the *self-selection* of students. They were to follow an individual pathway and choose the subjects and the levels they wished to pursue. If they could not manage it and dropped out, this appeared increasingly as an individual choice. Furthermore the dropout problem became more socially invisible since the structure of stable classes had weakened and it was less clear for the students who of their mates were just following another course and who had dropped out.

In addition to this new type of individualisation the dual system places a great responsibility on the individual student for acquiring a training placement. VET schools generally take in all students who seek a place in the basic course of ½ - 2 year duration. And it is the task of the colleges to ensure that students are able to start a 2-3-year placement with a company, where the students continue their training and complete their apprenticeship. However, the supply of training places varies depending on the state of the economy, and the companies by no means accept all students who seek a placement. In summer 2010, one third of all students who had completed their basic course did not have a training placement in a company and thus could not continue their education in a normal way.

The students' competition in the market for training places promotes a process of selection in the basic courses, where teachers' selective attention and recognition of students interact with the students own in- and exclusion of each other in their groupings. This affects especially ethnic minorities who do not have access to social networks that can help them to acquire a training place. My interviews show that many students accept that they themselves have the main responsibility for finding a placement. Due to the shortage of placements many students don't succeed, and this is one of the main reasons for dropping out of vocational education. The gap between demand and supply on the training market has been an almost permanent malfunction of the dual system, since the reform in 1976 that allowed students to start in the first school based part of a vocational programme without having a training contract with a company in advance. During the basic course the students have to find a training placement. The students' competition for placements result in a market based selection that is often perceived as an personal failure and thus individualised.

The institutional individualisation of the reform in 2000 did not succeed in increasing retention in vocational education, though it probably did meet the interests of the most committed students of having more individual choice. But the individualisation of the pathways was reported to increase the risk of dropping out for some of the most vulnerable students who needed more scaffolding and structured pathways (Koudahl 2005; Jensen a.o. 2009). The years following the reform saw an increase in dropout rates in the basic

courses from 20% to 30% (Munk 2011). A lesson to be learned from this is that policy interventions can have multiple, unintended consequences (Jørgensen 2011). National policies are often based on simple assumptions concerning the problems to be addressed and favour simple and standardised solutions based on 'best practice' and evidence. Dropout, though, is no simple problem, and thus policy measures have no uniform effect on the problem. Introducing more flexible and individualised courses did increase retention for some students but at the same time increased dropout for others depending on background of students and the way the reform was implemented in the vocational colleges. As dropout have multiple and complex causes, policies based on simplistic policy assumptions run a high risk of failing due to unintended consequences (Hodkinson & Bloomer 2001). As a consequence it would be more useful to conceive of the dropout problem as involving various dilemmas that must be coped with according to contextual conditions and opportunities – and thus requiring more professional knowledge than best practices.

## **6. Institutional selection and dropout**

The increased dropout rate following the reform in 2000 resulted in widespread criticism (Koudahl 2005), and consequently a reform in 2007 rolled back part of the institutional individualisation and flexibilisation. Going back to the state before the reform was not possible, since this would not solve the dropout problems and the challenges related to an increasingly diversified group of students. The solution was to replace the individual differentiation with an ability based division of school classes. All colleges were required by the Ministry to assess the prior learning of all students when they entered a vocational programme and to offer special basic courses for students with weak qualifications. This assessment would be used for the students drawing up their personal education plan and for placing the students on the various courses with different levels. In my study I found that in three of the most common programmes the students were divided in ability based groups at three different levels and lengths: one fast 'elite' class for the most committed and experienced learners and for those who have a training contract with a company; another class for the 'average' students and a third 'extra class' for the weak learners who were to go through an extended course.

There were signs the students perceived of these classes as being hierarchically ordered, but generally the students in average and fast classes were satisfied with the class they were in and found that it was the right place to be. For example students in one of the 'normal' classes emphasised the advantages of having more time to go deeper into the vocational subjects and improve the quality of the tasks they were given – and to criticise the arrogance of students in the 'elite' programmes.

To divide students with very diverse qualifications and ambitions in different classes can make it possible to adjust the curriculum, teaching methods and progression to the specific requirements of the students and give them positive learning experiences. The learners can feel more confident among classmates with similar qualifications as themselves and thus develop self-confidence and engagement. And this can improve retention especially for weak learners, who might feel exposed in a class with experienced and fast learners. But the assessment, categorising and selection of students also seemed to have negative effects.

In three of the programmes studied I found signs of a stigmatising effect of being in a special class for weak learners. This was for example expressed in this way in a group interview with three men in a normal class in a programme in the building trades:

Interviewer: *“Did you yourselves choose the class of 30 weeks that you are in? “*

S1: *"No, but the teachers here, the first two weeks, this was kind of a test (laugh) kind of to see the attitude, how it was. And then we were divided in the different classes. Nothing racist, but all the immigrants are in that 30 plus class. I don't know why, but then they don't take it serious any of them."*

S2: *"Or those who like to smoke a joint in hedge are over there, I think"*

S1: *"Yes, it is the junkies and the immigrants in that class".*

They also complained about the turbulence and trouble in the 'extra class' that made the teachers spend more of their time on this class and neglect their own class. Many of the students complained that the teachers did not have enough time to make instructions and described how they had to compete for the teachers' attention and advice.

There were thus indications that it had in itself a negative effect on students to be placed in a class for weak learners as the students positively identified with their own class and made negative demarcations to the other classes. Some of the students in the extra class, though, did not identify with their class.

One of the students in an extra 12 week class in the programme for mechanics said:

S3: *"Well, these 12 week courses are a bit, ... the students in the other classes look down at us, so we should look up to them . So we are being mocked by being in the 12 week class"*

Question: *" is it meant friendly or is it malicious?"*

S3: *" Yes, both".*

In another vocational college in our study there were no signs of a stigmatising effect of being in an 'extra' class (Tanggaard 2011). On the contrary since the students here got more attention from teachers and a classroom with more facilities that appeared more 'homely' students considered this class as more attractive than the normal class. In a third college I studied placing students in the lowest ability class was used as a penalty on students who broke the rules or had too much absence from school, which increased the stigmatising effect of being there. These findings indicate that the self-fulfilling nature of categorisation and its stigmatising effect is no necessary effect of forming ability based groups and classes; it depends on how the college and the teachers handle it.

Another observed reason why the division of students in ability based groups run a risk of being self-fulfilling is that classes at the low ability level are assigned with teachers with poorer qualifications and that these teachers place lower expectation on students in these classes. My student interviews in a business college indicated that this was a problem. One student complained about the uncommitted teaching and absence of teachers – which observations confirmed. In his class the vocational teacher had been replaced with a social pedagogue with a rough appearance who was assumed to be better handling the 'difficult' students. In addition in ability based groups there is a risk of negative peer group effect when the least engaged and motivated students are placed in the same class. One of the students in this 'extra' class mentioned said:

*"We are kind of a group that want to go back to a normal class. And then you have those who just 'fool around, fool around', right? It is like divided in two groups." "It is so that sometimes you jump on to their bandwagon, you get engaged, it is not too often you get involved, luckily. But of course sometimes you become not so concentrating, so you cannot make a good assignment."*

This and other interviews indicate that groups that are separated and categorised as 'less able' or 'losers', can develop a common anti-school culture (Willis 1977; Frosh & Phoenix & Pattman 2002). This culture can be interpreted as part of the students' subcultural resistance to the dominant norm of the college that will increase the students' risk of dropping out of education. Our studies show that dividing the students in ability based groups in some instances might help students in risk of dropping out by adjusting the teaching

and giving attention to their personal problems or learning disabilities. But it might also be demotivating to be positioned as a 'weak learner' and it can reinforce an anti-school culture through a peer group effect that increases their dispositions to drop out.

## 7. Social exclusion and dropout

Young people have many diverse reasons for participating in education: their interest in the subject, the ambition to get into an occupation and become somebody (Colley a.o. 2003) or to have friends, get social recognition and belong to a social community. Many of the students tell about the informal groupings and social relations that develop in the classes often basically on the basis of gender, ethnicity, age and earlier friendship. Some of these groupings were very visible during my observations in classes as well as in the cantina and the schoolyard. From the description of the students these groupings were not very exclusive or hierarchically ordered, just different in styles, interests and norms, for example boys and girls. Some though mentioned that students were assessed according to their 'popularity' in the class, where some were higher and others lower on the scale. It seemed important for students' inclination to stay on in college that they were in a social group, were accepted and had friends they could trust, talk to and have fun with. One student for example was early in the school year isolated following after a conflict on an introductory tour of the class to Berlin. He described his situation as 'being different' from his classmates, and when I came to interview him the second time in college, he had dropped out.

More important for the risk of dropping out was the informal groupings based on students' commitment to study, their vocational skills and their prior acquaintance with the occupation. The interviews revealed that students often divide themselves into two groups consisting on the one hand of the most uncommitted students and on the other hand the most committed students, and in between a middle group that can relate to either of the two sides. A core group among the most committed are the students who already have a training contract with a company. In the other end of the class the uncertainty of finding a training placement discouraged some students from investing their personal engagement in the course.

One student in a mechanic programme said:

*"There are those who really don't care and those who do. ... We are a group of three or four students who have chosen to beg off all the fun of the fair and we try to take it as serious as possible. ... I have announced from the beginning whom I wanted to work with and whom I didn't, and how serious I took it and they accept it."*

He later describes how the group of committed students included one of the more unengaged students and helped him becoming engaged. In general the students express a high degree of tolerance to each other, though sometimes conflict arises when the most uncommitted students make trouble, tease and disturb the committed group. One of the committed and more mature students for example told how he nearly was provoked into a fight with an uncommitted mate, who was later on expelled for smoking hash.

The teachers often seem to accept the presence of uncommitted students in lessons, partly because the schools are obliged to keep the students. Only in the case of a serious breach of the rules are students actually expelled. However, in their teaching, teachers give priority to those students who are committed and in particular to those who have secured training places in a company and thus need to be prepared in time. At the same time, this means that students in some classes have to actively earn attention and recognition from the teachers. It is difficult for some students who do not have a training place in a company and who are undecided about their choice of course to motivate themselves in their struggle for the teachers' attention. These students can instead become attracted to the company of the uncommitted students in the

class. There are indications that the social dynamics of these groupings can increase the risk of dropping out of some of the most uncertain students. Becoming involved with the group of unengaged students can strengthen their dissociation with the teaching and the rest of the class.

In some cases the interviews, like the one above, showed that students don't always accept it when teachers try to mix the students in groups across their informal grouping. The committed students don't want to waste their time and energy on the student who are not engaged.

In addition the students with few resources, who group together as uncommitted students, run a risk of receiving only negative attention from the teachers and the institution. If they themselves form a group of uncommitted students and at the same time are categorised as uncommitted by teachers and other students, this can become a self-perpetuating process of marginalisation that ends up with them dropping out. Thus the process of dropping out can also be a result of processes of in- and exclusion in the informal groupings of the students and the social positions and identities that they convey. My interviews indicate that the institutional selection carried out by the teachers and the college could in some cases reinforce the informal exclusion processes among the students, and in some cases oppose them. This is confirmed by other researchers, for example of teachers intervening to neutralise a polarised racist discourse in group of students in a vocational college (Hansen 2010).

## **8. Discussion and conclusion**

The paper has examined students' dropping out of vocational colleges as a result of various selection and exclusion processes. First of all the high dropout rates from Danish VET programmes should be seen in the context of the social selection that takes place during recruitment to the two different tracks of higher secondary education. The students with the least resources to complete an education end up in VET, while the students who have more resources find their way to the Gymnasiums – general upper secondary education. At the same time, an increasing number of students per youth cohort are enrolling in the Gymnasiums, including a proportion of committed students who would previously have opted for VET. Moreover, a number of students who would previously have gone directly into the labour market after compulsory schooling are now entering VET. The opportunities are much more limited today for unskilled youth to enter a labour market where *"working-class kids get working-class jobs"* in the words of Paul Willis (1977). Due to the active labour market policy they are now obliged to continue in education and training.

It is the government's policy that 95% of all young people complete an 2-4 year education programme after compulsory schooling, and that responsibility mainly falls in the vocational colleges. On the one hand, VET schools are expected to socialise and keep a large group of students with poor resources, and on the other hand they are expected to supply a qualified workforce for a strongly competitive labour market. The contradictory nature of this situation for colleges is one of the driving forces behind the internal institutional selection processes of students in the colleges, which leads to some students dropping out. My fieldwork showed that students are often divide themselves into three groups consisting of uncommitted students at one end and committed students at the other, with a middle group that the other groups jostle over. The students themselves form groups according to their commitment to the course and according to their prior learning and knowledge of the occupation. The students with few resources who group together as uncommitted students get only negative attention or none at all from the teachers and the institution. If they independently form a group as uncommitted students and at the same time are categorised as uncommitted by teachers and other students, this can become a self-perpetuating marginalisation that ends up with

them dropping out.

The institutional selection of students also takes form of two weeks of assessment of prior learning (and 'attitudes' in the words of a student) at the start of their basic training. Schools use this to divide the students into ability based groups according to their level of qualification, ambition and "attitude". VET schools have been required by education policy to split students up into different levels in order to lower the drop-out rate. However, the effects can be ambiguous. On the one hand teaching can be more targeted and effective and accommodate the different learning needs and rates, when students are divided into different levels depending on their prior qualifications. It can prevent the least qualified students from feeling inadequate compared to the more experienced and committed students and thus stop them from losing their self-confidence. By learning together with other students on the same level they can be in a community of people with similar abilities and feel academically competent.

On the other hand however, sorting students according to ability can also increase inequality by exposing the students who are in a lower-level group to lower expectations from the teachers and the institution than students on a higher level. The division can also contribute to negative "peer learning", whereby uncommitted students reinforce each others' norms and develop an "anti-school" culture (Willis 1977; Dolby a.o. 2004). This might set in motion self-perpetuating processes of institutional selection, social exclusion and sub-cultural resistance, whereby students adopt the institution's categorisation and develop communities on the basis of resistance to school and teaching (Frosh & Phoenix & Pattman 2002). In other words the institutional selection encourages a sub-cultural self-selection that might lead to students dropping out. Institutional categorisation and selection thus becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as it has a stigmatising effect, when the students themselves and their surroundings see them as "weak" and uncommitted and treat them accordingly. Our interviews show several indications of this.

The dropout of students can be seen as an unintentional result of a series of different institutional and market-based selection processes. Young people complete their basic schooling with different results and experiences, which to a large degree reflect their parents' social and economic situation. These results and experiences form the basis for the selection of students to the two educational tracks, with students with fewer resources entering VET. As described, this sorting and selection of students can have a positive effect in that they can participate in their education with challenges that are on a suitable level, allowing them to complete their course. VET programmes based on the dual system function as a "safety net" for the students who are not oriented towards academic forms of education. Furthermore, the basic school-based training in particular can provide extra support to undecided and uncommitted students who need more time and other forms of teaching than the focused students. However, as shown, selection and sorting can also have unintentional negative effects. Students dropping out can be a result of self-perpetuating processes of institutional selection of colleges, social exclusion from student communities and sub-cultural self-selection. These kinds of processes are, however, not automatic or a causal result of the students' social background. On the contrary, they can be seen as arising from a certain context and from students' own interpretation and strategies with regard to the education system's division and categorisation.

In interviews it was found that students on the whole regard division into ability based classes as positive and in line with their own grouping and mutual categorisation. At one vocational college, the placing of certain students in basic training with special needs support was perceived as positive. The students felt

that the people in this class group received extra attention and a more flexible framework in which to develop (Tanggaard 2011). By contrast, at another school students perceived this as de-motivating, among other things because the special needs class was used to penalise rule-breaking and got less support from the teachers compared to the normal classes. This fits in with a comparative study of VET programmes, in which Preston and Green (2008) have pointed out that there is no definite link between how VET programmes are organised and the social inclusion and exclusion of students.

The impact of the education system's institutional selection depends on the way colleges, teachers and students interpret and manage it. Therefore, the challenge for politicians, heads and teachers is to achieve positive effects from allocating students to different levels while limiting the unintentional, negative, self-perpetuating effects. This can hardly be achieved through general political implementation of general measures nominated to be "best practices". Such measures and practices can have quite different effects in different contexts because dropout rates are a result of a complex interaction of many different factors in a local context over a period of time.

Today, the emphasis in education policy is on improving retention by seeking best practices and benchmarking colleges and steering them via funds and economic incentives. The schools are measured and rewarded on the basis of specific, politically selected indicators, which schools are prompted to optimise using economic incentives. This can induce schools to focus on the selected indicators rather than develop a comprehensive professional understanding of the students' diverse situations. And it can encourage schools to focus on the financial rather than the pedagogical aspects.

Furthermore, history shows that this type of policy carries the risk of creating just as many problems as it can solve. Behind the measured indicators for dropout rates are not just one, but several, complex problems, which are often also contradictory in their nature. It is not likely that they can be solved by standardised measures defined by education policy on the national level. Measures to reduce dropout rates applied in one place in the system bear a risk of increasing problems in another place (Jørgensen 2008). Individualisation of the courses might increase retention of some students but might make others drop out. The dropout problem is complex and raises a number of dilemmas for politicians, colleges and teachers. A true dilemma has no solution, but if it is acknowledged, it can be overcome by rethinking the problem and its causes.

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