

**'We had dreams' – In-between duty and
ability
A qualitative study of academic expectations
and support from home within young men
with minority background**

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Abstract

This article's main theme is high school dropout within young men with minority background. Studies show that this group of students are most likely to quit high school. Here, a young man with minority background is examined in order to answer the research question *What does a young man with a minority background say about academic expectations and support from home?* The young man, which is in his early 20's, has begun, interrupted, and re-continued his schooling. He is now a student in vocational studies, and has been interviewed about his school experiences and support from home. This study is part of the project *Marginalization and Co-Created Education* (MaCE). Therefore, the qualitative method that has been used to get insight into this man's experiences is the indirect approach. This form of data collection has enabled the informant to decide which topics from his school history he finds most important to share. The data analysis is based on a social constructivism, which means that the researcher's knowledge is constructed through the interaction between researcher and informant. However, it is important to point out that it is primarily the informant's perspective that is emphasized in this study. The findings show that his parents seem to have high expectations of him to excel academically. This seems to have influenced the young man's view of himself. To sum up, academic support from home is absent, but the academic expectations appear to be enormous. Thus, the idea of academic success seem to make the move from the parents' home country worthy.

Key words

Dropout, youth with minority background, indirect approach, cultural capital, academic expectation from home, academic support from home.

Introduction

High school dropout has proven to be a costly societal challenge on several levels (Reegård & Rogstad, 2016, p. 9). Firstly, it costs society an enormously amount of money. Secondly, it can have major consequences for the individual. Research shows that dropouts can create challenges for youth entering the labour market. This because most jobs and positions require formal competence (Mjaavatn & Frostad, 2014, p. 48; NOU 2018: 2, 2018, pp. 11 & 84). Being excluded from school and labour can therefore lead to long-term unemployment, marginalization and social exclusion (NOU 2018: 2, 2018, p. 93; Hammer & Hyggen, 2013, p. 16). The Norwegian school's most important mandate is to facilitate and communicate knowledge as well as to provide all students with the same opportunities regardless of their background (Directorate of Education, 2017, 4 & 15). Nevertheless, it still seems that socio-economic status contributes to students' school performance and schooling in general (Statistics Norway, 2017; Bakken & Hyggen, 2018, p. 16 & 48; Vogt, 2008, p. 525; Rogstad, 2016, p. 132).

Over the past decades, immigration has increased significantly in Norway. Nowadays, the student group with minority backgrounds constitutes a large proportion of Norwegian students (Statistics

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Norway, 2020). In Norway, high school dropout rates are measured on the basis of whether students have attained study or vocational qualifications within five years after starting high school (Reegård & Rogstad, 2016, p. 11; Dybvik, 2014, p. 56). Nationwide, boys are more likely to quit school than girls, and overall young men born outside of Norway are most likely to quit high school (Institute of Social Research, 2019, p. 12; Rogstad, 2016, p. 137; Markussen, Frøseth, Lødding & Sandberg, 2008, p. 13; Lauglo, 2010, p. 15). When one in three young men with a minority background leaves school before completing their high school education, one must wonder why these students struggle more than their peers (Statistics Norway, 2017, p. 85). On the other hand, they often have high ambitions and a general drive to do well academically (Lauglo, 2010, p. 26).

Based on these initial perspectives, this article examines a young man with minority background and his subjective experiences from school. In addition, I would like to investigate how his parents and home support him through his educational journey. The research question is as follows: *What does a young man with a minority background say about academic expectations and support from home?* The young man, which is in his early 20's, has begun, dropped out and re-entered his schooling. He is now a student in vocational studies. The overall purpose for the study is to better understand how this man with minority background navigates between experiences at school and support as well as expectations from home.

Drop-out and academic outlooks within young men with a minority background

In the introduction, the importance of socio-economic status regarding to schooling was highlighted. A person's socio-economic background can be described as their social and financial resources, which is measured by their parents' education and income (Bakken, 2003, p. 50). Research points out that minority students have lower social backgrounds than their peers who belong to the majority, and that this affects their education (Bakken & Hyggen, 2018, p. 16 & 48; Fekjær, 2006, p. 61 & 68). Minority parents can often have a lack of knowledge of the education system in Norway. This can according to Lauglo (1999, p. 78), lead to a lack of academic support and challenges with orientation in the education system. In addition, research points out that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more prone to school dropout and utilizing the education system less (Fekjær, 2006, 59; Bakken & Hyggen, 2018, p. 9; Markussen et al., 2008, p. 29 & 70-71). Despite their lack of knowledge about the education system, research shows that minority parents have stronger academic expectations for their children than majority parents (Prieur, 2004, in Fekjær 2006, p. 63; Bakken, 2003, p. 15 & 73). Higher education is a prerequisite for social and academic mobility, and it seems that many minority parents are aware of this (Lauglo, 2010, p. 26-27; Bakken, 2003, p. 105). Several of those who have immigrated to Norway, whether they have fled from war or come here to work, have in common the desire to do well in the new country (Statistics Norway, 2020). For many it starts with education and the desire for their children to take advantage of the opportunities they have and the awareness that this would not be possible in their country of origin (Lauglo, 2010, p. 28).

Bourdieu's (1995) theory of cultural capital points out that school helps to maintain social divisions in society by treating students differently from their socio-economic backgrounds. Cultural capital can be described as knowledge and behaviour in the form of language, cultural aspects and access to resources that are seen as valuable to hold in a society (Wilken, 2011). A person's degree of cultural capital is calculated from their social affiliation and is inherited by children observing their parents. Furthermore, it is the upper class and middle class culture that is considered to be "correct" (Wilken, 2011). In school, cultural capital is knowledge of social codes that are accepted by teachers and the education system (Bourdieu, 1997). Teachers value students who have the same cultural capital as themselves, and according to Bourdieu (1995), most teachers belong to the middle class. According to this, students with similar cultural capital as the educational system, will have an advantage. They often feel an affiliation with school as well as being seen and understood by their educators. At the

same time, students who have a different cultural capital can feel alienated when their values are not recognized.

Many young people with a minority background also have their own drive towards education, which is often linked to making up for what they believe are the sacrifices their parents have made (Lauglo, 1999, p. 79; Lauglo, 2010, p. 26). Minority students often choose elite studies such as law, medicine and engineering; thus, this underlines their ambitions (Lauglo, 2010, p. 17). Some of the motivation young people with minority backgrounds have within education is the way education contribute to strengthen their future as well as the whole family (Lauglo, 2010, p. 29). Many have also strong feelings of guilt about their parents leaving their home country and sacrificing several things. Thus, many feel that they are obligated to take advantage of the opportunities they have and to satisfy their parents by showing gratitude (Lauglo, 2010, pp. 30-31). In many families, the attitudes regarding to work is "as long as you work hard enough you will achieve your goals" (Leirvik, 2012, p. 193 & 207).

According to Lauglo (2010, p. 13), young people with a minority background also show greater endurance within education than their peers. Research shows that they work harder on school tasks than the average student and according to Lødding (2009, pp. 150-151 in Lauglo, 2010, p. 16), they simply work harder than others do. Nevertheless, they seem to perceive school as more difficult than their peers, more specifically, challenges with academic words and expressions (Lauglo, 2020, p. 16). Bakken (2003, p. 17) also claims that students with minority backgrounds may have challenges with the language, especially with what is referred to as academic language. The latter consists of abstract words and subject terminology and therefore takes longer for students to master than everyday language, which again consists of concrete and frequently used words (Cummins, 2000 in Bakken, 2003, p. 17). This may be one of the reasons why minority students have lower primary school marks than their peers (Leirvik, 2012, p. 190). Research shows that students who have immigrated to Norway have the lowest average compulsory school marks, especially in the subject of Norwegian language (Statistics Norway, 2017, p. 83; Lauglo, 2010, p. 14).

Method

The scientific-philosophical framework for this article is based on a social-constructivism. The fundamental idea of social constructivism is that knowledge and understanding are constructed in social contexts between participants, for example in the interaction between a researcher and an informant (Creswell, 2014, p. 8; Bryman, 2012, s. 29; Thagaard, 2018, p. 40-41). Based on this interaction, the researcher can develop an understanding of the informants' own perception of their school- and life experiences, as well as their social contexts.

The method to gather data is the indirect approach. This is a qualitative interview, used by all researchers in MaCE. The indirect approach is also an ethnographically inspired interview that is informal and unstructured. This means that only open-ended questions are asked. The researcher only follows up on topics that the informants themselves have presented in the interviews. This allows the informants to emphasize which aspects that have been meaningful for their life and schooling (Moshuus & Eide, 2016, p. 7). When using this approach, one gets access to the informants' world and even gets answers to questions one did not intend to ask in the first place (Moshuus & Eide, 2017, pp. 4-6).

The method for data analysis is a hermeneutic approach. This is based on Hans-Georg Gadamer's theories of interpretation as a process where both understanding and gathering new experiences are used to interpret data (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p. 73; Befring, 2016, p. 111). It is about interpreting a text subjectively to understand it better, which in this case is transcripts of interviews. The researcher is looking for the meaning of the data (Befring, 2016, p. 21). Furthermore, hermeneutics switches

between interpreting parts of the text and the whole text (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p. 237), also referred to as the hermeneutic circle. Kvale and Brinkmann (2015, p. 237) emphasize that it allows a deeper understanding of the text.

An important prerequisite in research is to be transparent and to describe the entire research process carefully. Validity is the indication of whether the findings of a study are well-grounded (Befring, 2016, 54; Thagaard, 2018, p. 189). The researcher must be self-critical while reading and interpreting the data to avoid researcher bias, and needs to be aware of their own prejudices and expectations (Befring, 2016, pp. 54-55). Reliability is about a study's credibility and verifiability (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p. 276; Thagaard, 2018, p. 187). It can be difficult to reproduce and get exactly the same findings in qualitative studies. One way to ensure reliability is through having several researchers interpret the same data independently (Befring, 2016, p. 56; Bryman, 2016, p. 384). Ethics is about respecting and protecting the informants of your research (Johannesen, Tufte & Christoffersen, 2016, p. 83). Research can address topics that may be significant but sensitive for the informants. In regards to this, Thagaard (2018, p. 60) emphasizes that it is important to be cautious when interviewing the informants.

Regarding to the selection of informants, it was initially desirable that the informants had attended Norwegian school since early childhood. The reason for this is that they have been students in Norwegian schools for a long time. It may also seem that many in this student group can be said to have had nearly the same conditions as the majority population. The selection can be said to be an accessibility selection. Thagaard (2018, p. 56) claims that such selection is based on informants available at the time the selection takes place. Nevertheless, selection can also be said to be a strategic choice, as the informant is chosen to answer the question due to his knowledge and experience in a particular field (Thagaard, 2018, pp. 54-56; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p. 123; Bryman, 2016, p. 410). The informant that was chosen for this research, is a young man with a minority background, who has dropped out of and restarted high school. He was born outside Norway, but has at the same time lived in Norway for a long time. Since there is only one informant for this article, it is essential to be careful to draw general conclusions. Bryman (2016, p. 384) emphasizes that it is beneficial to be cautious about generalizing findings. In addition, Thagaard (2018, p. 55) also expresses the importance of being careful in drawing conclusions from a smaller sample. The purpose of this study, as mentioned before, is to retrieve the informant's own explanations about his school story. While others may share his experiences, it is important to emphasize that this story is subjective and cannot be said to be representative for many other young men with minority backgrounds in Norway.

Analysis

The informant in this study is Adil, a young man in his early 20s. He was born in a Central Asian country and came to Norway in his early childhood. During their first years in Norway, the family lived in a small town in southern Norway, which he described as the perfect place to be a "newbie". He said that he learned Norwegian by playing with the other children and that he enjoyed school. Eventually, the family moved to a larger city to live among what Adil described to be a greater diversity of people. For Adil, the transition was huge. The new school was filled with conflicts, especially between the boys. There were many physical fights and Adil said that it scared him. He told me that he used to rely on his mother during this period, and it seems like Adil has a close relationship with his mother.

Regarding to academically aspect of his schooling, he said that he has worked hard in middle school. He described that, in middle school, both him and his friends had dreams and worked hard to achieve them. After middle school, he started general studies and says that he used much of his time on schoolwork. There was a lot of assessments at school in the form of tests and submissions, and Adil wanted to do well and thus worked hard. Eventually Adil became ill and his diagnosis made it difficult to continue with further education. He had a lot of physical pain and his condition worsened:

I did not want to give up and it was really 3-4 months of hell, I even struggled to sleep. Then, I realized it was a problem. We also realized that the doctors in this country are not very good, so we went down to [country in Asia] and in [country in Asia] they understood what it was.

It seems that Adil was trying to endure the physical pain and was determined to continue with school but realized that his condition was not improving, if anything, it was getting worse. His statement indicates that his parents tried to support him since they went abroad with him to seek medical help. It appears that the family felt that the Norwegian health care system was not adequate to help their son. Despite his health problems, his parents wanted him to continue with school:

Because my mom and my dad, they really pushed me to study, right. My mom wanted to see me in a high position. It was not like "you should", but "you have to". I'll drive you up there. And whatever you need, I will help you, and I was like okay, I will.

Although Adil struggled with his health and seemed to be affected mentally of the issues, his parents continued to push him. Considering this, it seems as if his parents had high expectations of him. In this quote, it does not seem like Adil had any choice. It appears that his parents gave him orders and not advice. He said, among other things, that his parents used the word "have to" instead of "should". Further, the following shows that Adil accepted their high expectations, by saying "I was like okay, I will." He also said that his parents wanted him to exceed academically, and it seems that the only path they saw for him in order to do so, was to continue with general studies. The reason why his parents pushed Adil to continue with general studies may be that these studies enables students to move on to higher education. He continued to talk about some discussions he had with his mother:

There is no such thing as not being able to do it. She was like: You can handle anything...you just have to kill yourself. You have to fight and fight and fight and fight and fight and fight. There is nothing called "I can't do it", she was like: You have misunderstood.

In this quote, Adil tried to describe his mother's enormous expectations for him. "Kill yourself" is here referred to as "working hard" or "go beyond your limits". He paraphrasing her statement can be understood as her expecting him to risk everything, even his health. This can put a great amount of pressure on a young man struggling with health issues who, in addition, seems to be struggling with pressure for himself to do well and the feeling of a "stolen" future. At the same time, it seems that his mother is also his biggest supporter. Adil said that she has not given up yet and that she is still working to find a solution to his health issue. She has even promised to take him to another country for medical help. It seems that there is a two-sided relationship between Adil and his mother; on one hand, she seems to have enormous demands for her son, but on the other hand, she is willing to help him along the way.

Eventually, Adil discontinued with general studies and started a vocational study program. It was not easy for him to start over and Adil did not try to adapt. The most important thing, he said, was to finish the first year. The conversation with Adil showed that he first did not want to start vocational studies and that this was something he had never considered before. His dream was to study medicine or finances, which is why he had initially begun general studies. However, he said that because of his health issue he had to start a study, which, according to him, demanded less effort from his side. Only then, he made the choice to start the vocational study program. Adil may have felt that vocational training was not good enough for him, but he had to settle for one field of study due to his

circumstances. This also appears in several quotes below. Although his health was improving, he still had some challenges, yet he endured:

Where are you going? You're hurting, but where are you going to go? You're not going to be an engineer or anything, but you can't even do a little bit. I am attending [vocational studies], where you do almost nothing. It's something you can hardly study for.

Despite the pain that accompanied his diagnosis, Adil continued to push himself. His statement shows that he is taking it for granted to pass vocational studies. According to himself, this is a field of study that required little effort. It seems that he may have put great pressure on himself, for example, when he says "I can't drop out of school for that. What am I? Weak?". Considering that Adil is already unsatisfied with school, he also had great pain deriving from his illness. Furthermore, Adil claimed that the profession he will invest four years of his life in, is a profession that does not require any further education in his home country. He said that in his home country, you learn it by watching others do it. He refers to "proper" professions as doctors and engineers. This suggests that the pressure of having to pass the first year is partially created by him, thinking that vocational studies are not that demanding. This may have driven Adil to finish the year, which could be seen as positive or negative.

It seems that Adil has mixed, if not painful, emotions associated with his future that has not become the way he imagined. He talks about some of his former classmates who have now begun to study subjects, which he had once planned to study. This might show that it is difficult for him to study a subject that is not his first choice. Despite Adil's painful feelings related to his "stolen" future, he seems to thrive within vocational studies. He even said that he preferred to be in the workshop and gets a lot of praise from the teachers. On the other hand, he has been told to study theoretical subjects more intensely. Still, he does not seem completely satisfied with his everyday life. Eventually, it emerges why his parents seem to have pressured him to continue with general studies, and claimed that vocational studies are not good enough. Adil said that his mother had come to Norway as the first member of the family and then arranged for the rest of them to come (in Norwegian: "familiegjening"). He described this process as demanding for the parents. It took many years for the family to be reunited and Adil acknowledges that it impacted both, the children and the parents. It does not seem as if Adil has forgotten his roots and how tough life would have been in his home country. This is something his parents constantly remind him of:

Because in the home country, it is only the luckiest and happiest of people who come to Europe. So, when we got here, she wanted us to be something big. If we had been in the [home country], we would have been beggars or shoemakers or something. Because it's not like we were born in Norway and become what we want. But it's my mom who has worked hard for this, hard for this.

It is apparent that Adil is very aware that his circumstances would have been different if the family had stayed in his home country. It shows that he is aware of how fortunate he is to be in a liberal and safe country, which gives him opportunities he might not have had in his home country. He expressed that his parents want him to become something "big". It is possible to assume that they are aiming for higher-paying occupations than the profession their son chose. In addition, Adil pointed out a difference between young people who are born in Norway and young people who have immigrated to Norway. It seems that he simply feels a duty to choose the careers his parents want for him, in order to show gratitude for their hard work. In particular, he emphasized that his mother has worked hard for them to come to Norway and that her work must not be in vain. He also described how he has tried to encourage his parents by pointing out that wages in some artisan professions, can be as high as

what his parents call "better" professions. However, Adil said that his parents have gradually put less pressure on him, especially because they realized that it was the illness that has been standing in his way.

To summarize Adil's story, it seems like it exists a gap between what Adil manage to do in real life and what his parents expect of him. His parents have great expectations, but still struggle to support him academically. In addition, Adil seems to be aware of the opportunities he has in Norway, but find it difficult to advantage them. In this way, the young man is experiencing pressure from different angles, both from himself and from his parents.

Discussion

Some of the challenges Adil has struggled with, derive from his parents and the great pressure he seems to be experiencing at home. Research shows that minority parents are involved in the education of their children (Prieur, 2004 in Fekjær, 2006, p. 63; Bakken, 2003, p. 15 & 73). Although Markussen et al. (2008, p. 10) point out that the level of education influences ambition, other research shows that minority parents have higher academic aspirations for their children than other parents (Bakken, 2003, p. 73). Their high academic expectations of the children seem to be linked to the desire to do well in the new country (Bakken, 2003, p. 105). The story of Adil showed that especially his mother was not completely satisfied with him, since he did not pursue the future the parents had envisioned for him. It simply seems that they are afraid of him not succeeding in vocational education or that he will not take advantage of the opportunities that Norway has to offer. As Lauglo (2010, p. 28) describes, it is important for many minority parents that the children take advantage of the opportunities they might not have had in their home country. The high academic expectations some minority parents have for their children, could help the children complete their education and replace the lack of for example, cultural capital. Whether the pressure some of them seem to be exposed to, is good for their mental health, is still debatable.

The young man expressed disappointment in himself to not to end up with a college degree, but instead, a certificate of apprenticeship. His feelings seem to be strongly influenced by his parents' expectations of him. He seems to judge and put tremendous mental pressure on himself. It is reasonable to assume that some of this pressure may have originated from the parents. For many people with a minority background, education can be a tool to succeed in life and to what Bakken (2003, p. 105) refers to as "the immigrant drive". This also seems to be the case for the young man within this study. Young people with a minority background may also feel that they owe their parents to do well academically, as a way of showing gratitude for bringing them to countries where they have better opportunities (Lauglo, 1999, p. 79). According to this young man's own story, it seems that his parents' expectations, as well as his own, caused him to defy pain and dissatisfaction, and also gave him determination to finish the first year in the field of vocational studies. The feeling that his future is important to more than himself is clear, as it is also clear to many other students with the same background (Lauglo, 2010, p. 17). His story shows that he had never considered vocational studies before. In addition, he seems to think that some education is better than no education at all.

While the parents have high expectations for him, their support seems to be limited to mental support. Adil's parents do not have formal education beyond elementary school, and theory by Bourdieu (1997) and other research points out that socio-economic status is calculated on the foundation of parents' education and income (Bakken & Hyggen, 2018, p. 16 & 48; Fekjær, 2006, p. 61 & 68). Furthermore, research shows that socio-economic status affects students' school performance and that they have a disadvantage if their status is lower. Bourdieu's cultural capital (1997) may help explain that students with lower socio-economic backgrounds have less access to resources, such as the "correct" cultural capital. Adil's socio-economic background means that he has a different cultural capital, and one can

thus feel that there is no room for one's own cultural capital. In this way, he lacks the advantage many majority peers have. His parents seem to lack knowledge about the education system in Norway. This means, among other things, that they do not have the opportunity to assist with academic support.

As mentioned in the analysis, Adil thrived in vocational subjects, but struggled with theory. Adil's academic challenges may be related to language difficulties. In the personal notes for the interview, it was described that his Norwegian was lacking proper grammar. According to Bakken (2003, p. 17), students with minority backgrounds may have difficulties with academic language as it is often more complex than everyday language. Considering the language challenges he experiences every day, it is reasonable to question if he also experienced challenges within academic language. This is due to the fact that academic language consists of abstract and difficult subject terminology, which may have been even more difficult for him (Bakken, 2003, pp. 17-18). Although Adil did not clearly state this, it is not unlikely that his challenges with theoretical subjects were due to language. This may have affected the effort he put into school tasks. Nevertheless, Adil has been persistent unlike many students with minority backgrounds as Lauglo (2010, p. 13) describes.

To sum up, the finding and discussion indicate that Adil seems to be in a situation where he is trying to balance his parents' academic expectations, his own expectations and what he is actually capable of academically. Although these challenges in themselves are more than enough, they must also be seen in the context of the Norwegian educational system. One may wonder how the best way in which school can support students with academic challenges related to language, lack of academic support at home, and who also might be struggling with the high expectations coming from different angles.

Conclusion

Both research and theory show that young men with minority backgrounds are more prone to high school dropout, especially young men born outside of Norway. In addition, research shows that these young people may be more prone to pressure from themselves and their parents to excel academically. At the same time, they lack academic support, and in some cases struggle with academic language. On the basis of the analysis and the discussion, one could argue that schools need to meet the students at their level, both academically and emotionally. The pressure some of the students are exposed to may have an impact on their mental health. In addition, the Norwegian labour market needs more than just the high status professionals such as doctors and lawyer.

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MAHMOUD FARAH: "WE HAD DREAMS" – IN-BETWEEN DUTY AND ABILITY A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF
ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS AND SUPPORT FROM HOME WITHIN YOUNG MEN WITH MINORITY
BACKGROUND

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