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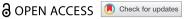Tone Aashild Dinesen, Bodil H. Blix & Astrid Gramstad

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Professional strategies in upper secondary school dropout management among youth in the Sami areas of Norway: a focus group study

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ABSTRACT

The upper secondary school dropout rate is a challenge in many western countries, and measures have been taken to prevent dropout. The dropout rate in Norway is stable but is the highest in the northernmost counties. The aim of this study is to explore the strategies employed by upper secondary school teachers and their collaborators to prevent dropout from upper secondary school among Sami youth in northern Norway. This study is based on three focus group interviews with teachers, advisers, nurses, and counsellors in the Sami areas of northern Norway. The thematic analysis identified two main strategies, namely tracking the student and giving the student time. Transparent environments, cultural competence, and interdisciplinary collaboration were identified as prerequisites for successfully implementing the two strategies to prevent dropout from upper secondary school.

Introduction

Youths who are dropping out of upper secondary school represent a problem in the Nordic countries [1,2] and globally [3–5], leading to concerns about the potentially adverse effects of unemployment on health and well-being [6,7] and national economies [8]. Concerns attached to non-completion of education are that it may lead to economic deprivation and various mental, social, occupational, and marital problems in adulthood [9]. In particular, a study by Shoshana [10] shows that youth who had dropped[1] out of upper secondary school did not express high aspirations or high levels of optimism but had expectations that their future would be comparable to their present. Also, previous studies have pointed out some long-term consequences of dropping out of school, such as reduced social function, mental problems, and the need for welfare services [1,5], including low income and unemployment [11,12], imprisonment, and poverty [13]. On the other hand, studies have shown that completing education paves the way for

youth to further their studies, to work, to improve their health and living conditions, and to accumulate welfare benefits. In addition, school attendance creates conditions for personal, emotional, social, and professional development [14–17].

Norway's dropout rate has been relatively stable over the last ten years. After compulsory schooling, from age 6 to 16 in Norway, nearly the whole cohort (97–98%) exercises their right to start education at upper secondary school [1]. According to Statistics Norway [18] 79% of Norwegian upper secondary school students complete their studies or acquire professional competence within five years. Nationwide, 30% of male and 20% of female students do not complete their education after five years [19]. All youths in Norway who have completed ten years of compulsory education have a statutory right to upper secondary school education (three years general track or four years vocational track including two years of apprenticeship). In addition, youths with extended rights can apply for five years of schooling [20]. The statutory right

[1]The term "dropout" describes those who do not complete an upper secondary qualification, and Markussen et al. [28] note that the term dropout refers to two categories, namely early school leavers and non-completers. Early school leavers are students who leave upper secondary school without finishing all the required years, whereas non-completers remain in school but do not ultimately pass all the required exams. In this study, "upper secondary school dropout" refers to both groups.

to complete upper secondary school continues until the end of the school year when the person turns 24 years of age. When the student has completed and passed all exams, he or she qualifies for higher education or vocational training [20].

The dropout rate is higher in northern Norway than in other OECD countries and the rest of Norway [21–23]. For the youth from remote areas of northern Norway, dropout rates connected to the vocational track are higher than among those in the general track [24]. International research has demonstrated higher dropout rates among Indigenous youths than majority populations [25–30]. For instance, according to Thelma, Chorney, and Poulsen [31] Indigenous youths in Canada have a higher risk of non-completion of upper secondary school compared to their non-Indigenous peers. Schwab [32] also indicates that a significantly higher proportion of Indigenous students in Australia's largest cities drop out of upper secondary school compared to their non-Indigenous peers. In addition, a study by Bania, Eckhoff, and Kvernmo [33] indicated significantly lower participation of Sami men in education, employment, and training compared to non-Sami men; however, the rate of participation was higher among Sami women compared to non-Sami women [21,24,34].

Background

The Sami are an Indigenous people with an estimated population between 55,000 and 100,000 who reside in Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Russian Kola Peninsula (collectively referred to as Sápmi) [35]. Approximately 40,000 of the Sami people live in the Norwegian part of Sápmi [36]. About one-third of the Sami population lives in Troms and Finnmark County, where the Sami are the majority in some local communities. Sixty-five per cent of those entitled to vote in the Sami parliamentary elections (11,128 Sami people) are residents in Troms and Finnmark county [18]. Substantial migration has occurred from traditional Sami municipalities to urban areas [37], and in Norway today many Sami people do not speak the Sami language due to previous public assimilation policies [38]. Northern Sami is the largest Sami language and is spoken by approximately 25,000 people in Norway (St. meld. nr. 55 [39]).

Norwegian policies to prevent dropout

Norwegian politicians, the school system, the health sector, and the labour and welfare administration express concerns that many students do not manage to complete upper secondary school or to join the workforce due to health problems [40]. Therefore, the authority's explicit ambition is to ensure that as many youths as possible complete upper secondary school [12]. Norway's national policies in education aim to facilitate students to complete upper secondary school and participate in work life so as to reduce dependence on welfare benefits for survival [41]Meld. St. 21 [42]).

In Norway, upper secondary school is the responsibility of the counties, and a vast majority of the upper secondary schools are publicly funded. In addition, there are two Sami upper secondary schools with a common administrative board in Norway. These schools are state-owned and organised under the Ministry of Education and Research. The Education Act [20] requires that schools cooperate with relevant municipal services, including educational and psychological services (§ 5–6), to support children and adolescents with health, personal, social, or emotional challenges (§ 15–8). The Act also states that county municipalities must have a supervisory unit to advise and guide youths aged 15 to 24 (§ 3–1). In cooperation with The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NLWA), the supervisory unit is responsible for providing supervision in education, employment, and training to youths who have dropped out of school. Also, the NLWA secures financial support for students who drop out of upper secondary school [43]. Teachers, health nurses, advisers, counsellors, and other school staff in contact with upper secondary school students are at the forefront of discovering challenges and implementing intervention strategies to prevent dropout. Nonetheless, professionals from other sectors such as the healthcare sector and the social welfare sector, for example, the Educational Psychological Services, the Child Welfare Services, the Police Service, and the Psychiatric Services for Children and Adolescents, may be involved in some cases [44].

Drop out; knowledge gap

Overall, dropout from upper secondary school is a complex phenomenon associated with myriad individual, social, school, and systemic factors [1,45,46]. The individual and social risk factors include low scores, absenteeism, lack of motivation, lack of parental engagement, and family background. Both mental and physical health problems are explanations for the non-completion of school [9,47,48]. The school factors include school structure, school size, and school practice [46]. Finally, the systemic factors are connected to the range of locally available educational opportunities, lack of apprenticeship placement, and lack of

opportunities for vocational studies [1,49]. Combinations of individual, social, school, and systemic factors form complex intertwined patterns contributing to dropout [50]. Some factors often have origins in early childhood and escalate over the years [48,51].

To summarise, research on upper secondary school dropout is comprehensive [12,13,21,33,49,52–54], and much research has been conducted on risk factors for upper secondary school dropout [1,9,55–57] and the consequences of upper secondary school dropout at the individual and societal levels [1,58–61]. In addition, the implementation and effects of specific dropout prevention programs have also been the subject of research [5,13,53,62,63].

However, research on how upper secondary school teachers and their collaborators' work to prevent dropout among youth is sparse and even more so among Indigenous youth. In this qualitative study, we explore and discuss the strategies that upper secondary school teachers and their collaborators employ to prevent dropouts from upper secondary school among Sami youth in northern Norway.

Methods

Based on the article's objective, focus groups were considered a suitable approach because we wanted to explore professionals' experiences and measures to prevent dropout from upper secondary school. Overall, focus groups are suited to study the dynamics of social processes and to engage in discussions on a selected topic [64,65] and to explore phenomena and experiences that are poorly understood [66]. This study is based on three focus groups (FG 1–3) with 13 professionals who worked with youth at risk of dropping out of upper secondary school (defined by dropout indicators such as low scores, absenteeism, lack of motivation, and health, personal, social, or emotional challenges). The focus group meetings were conducted in two smaller district upper secondary schools (FG 1 and 2) that enrol fewer than 200 students and one urban upper secondary school (FG 3) with over 500 students.

Participants and recruitment

The participants (n = 13) were recruited in the two northernmost counties in Norway, namely Nordland and Troms and Finnmark. Because registration based on ethnicity is prohibited in Norway, we recruit participants in counties with known Sami populations. Leaders at the state, county and municipal levels granted permission to recruit participants at the state, county, and municipal levels. Based on the recommendation from the leaders, we contacted potential participants by phone, letter, and email. We recruited 13 participants with different professional backgrounds who had regular contact with youth in upper secondary school, which was one of the recruitment criteria. Also, all participants had experiences working with youth at risk of dropping out of upper secondary schools. The focus group are presented in Table 1.

Focus groups

The three focus groups were conducted in meeting rooms at a local hotel, a school, and a university campus. The discussions lasted approximately one and a half hours and were digitally recorded. Two researchers, the first and last author, were present during the focus group discussions, one as the moderator and one as the observer. The first author was the moderator in two focus groups and an observer in one focus group. The moderator was responsible for initiating group discussions and asking questions, and the observer observed group interactions, took notes, and asked additional questions on the topics of interest.

Table 1. Description of the participants in the focus groups.

	Gender	Professionals	Job %	Agencies
FG 1	Female	Counsellor	100%	The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Adm.
(n = 5)	Female	Therapist	100%	Family counselling services (Bufdir)
	Female	Teacher	100%	Upper secondary School
	Female	Teacher/Counsellor	50%/50%	Upper secondary School/Educational-psychological services
	Female	Teacher/Supervisor	80%/20%	School/Supervisory unit
FG 2	Female	Teacher/School adviser	50%/50%	Upper secondary school
(n = 4)	Female	Health nurse	100%	Upper secondary school
	Female	Nurse in mental health care	100%	Sami national competence service (SANKS)
	Male	Supervisor	100%	Supervisory unit
FG 3	Female	Supervisor	100%	Supervisory unit
(n = 4)	Female	Health nurse	100%	Upper secondary School
	Male	Teacher/School adviser	50%/50%	Upper secondary School
	Male	Social worker	100%	Follow up youths in the county

A broad topic guide was used in the interviews and included topics such as the assessments the participants made in their professional practice to prevent dropouts, descriptions of the measures the participants used, experiences with Sami youth, and any consideration of cultural conditions. The participants were encouraged to discuss and interact with each other in the group discussion, corresponding to the guidelines for focus groups initiated by Barbour [67]. After the focus group meetings, the researchers evaluated the interview, and the first author wrote field notes. Finally, all focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first author.

Analysis

We conducted a thematic text analysis using an inductive approach and identified themes as proposed by Braun and Clarke [68]. The analysis was data-driven, and the effort was to identify themes that could inform the strategies used by the participants to prevent dropout in upper secondary schools in the Sami areas of northern Norway. First, we familiarised ourselves with the data by reading and rereading the transcripts while noting initial ideas. Next, we created initial codes for topics in the entire data set, collating relevant data to each code. The search for patterns and contradictions in the data set was a recursive back-and-forth movement between the data set and the coded segments resulting in the adjustment and refinement of codes. Finally, we created potential themes by collating all codes relevant to each potential theme. The themes were revised and finalised during the writing process.

Ethics

The Norwegian centre for research data (NSD) approved the study, including the data generation and handling procedures. At the outset of the focus groups, we highlighted the purpose of the study, informed the participants about the right to withdraw from the study, and assured them that confidentiality would be maintained. Oral and written information about the study was also made available to the participants. Participation was voluntary, and the participants signed and returned the written informed consent to the first author.

Results

The efforts to prevent the youth in Sami areas in northern Norway from dropping out of upper secondary school revolved around two main strategies, namely "Tracking the student" and "Giving the student time".

Tracking the student is an ongoing proactive outreach and giving the student time is a sensitive wait-and-see assessment where the professionals validate and adapt their interactions with the student. The two strategies may appear to be contrasting because they represent opposite ways to engage with the students. However, the similarity in these strategies is the sustained attention professionals display in both strategies. The data shows that the two strategies were used in parallel, were intertwined, and were applied interchangeably, flexibly, and dynamically. A transparent environment made it easier to use both strategies and engaging in interdisciplinary collaboration was also more manageable in a transparent environment. Transparency, interdisciplinary collaboration, and cultural referencing were identified as crucial for successfully reducing dropout rates from upper secondary schools in the Sami areas of Norway.

Tracking the students

Being actively available was an evident strategy in the participants' narratives. The participants showed a great willingness to provide support and to motivate the student to come to school, stay there, and participate in school activities:

> So, they come with a lot of absences. First, we have to teach them how to get to school (…) we have to track those students. They do not show up at school. They do not have that routine (…) to be at the school for learning. (Teacher/supervisor, FG 1)

Being ongoing and proactive was also a strategy used to identify students who were at risk of failing tests and who needed academic support to pass the required exams:

> When we set term grades in January, we review the grades of all students (.) get an overview (.) then put in the measures (…) then the battle starts to pass the test. (Teacher/school adviser, FG 2)

The participants expressed the importance of considering the students' individual needs, and they adopted tailored measures to facilitate school participation:

> The facilitation is essential (…) somehow understand the difficulties (…) and organize homework exemptions or conduct the tests differently, these kinds of measures. This helps them to complete school. (Nurse in mental health care, FG 2)

Some participants described measures far beyond their job descriptions to support the youth in dealing with their everyday challenges. For example, participants reported helping students with their homework,

helping with moving to another dorm, helping them avoid distractions, or accompanying students to the health care services and hospitals:

> I asked a girl how she got to the hospital when getting sick at night, and she replied: 'My teacher was with me to make me feel safe'. (Health nurse, FG 2)

> Some teachers are afraid that students will not pass the exam and thus help them in their spare time. (Health nurse, FG 2)

Essential to the tracking strategy was being actively available during school hours and in leisure activities. Furthermore, the presence was grounded in the assumed importance of building relationships of trust in order to support the students in their everyday lives. In particular, the teachers emphasised the importance of being present in the context where the students were after school:

> We do a lot beyond our job description (…). Only in May, I have been to three parties, just to be present when they have student parties. I am there to ensure a safe environment. You do not get a penny for this and do not report such work either. However, I think that is an essential part of getting in touch with the youth (…). Most things happen after school and on weekends, and it is necessary to be there. If I were not there, because it is not my job, I think I would not have done an excellent job. (Teacher/school adviser, FG 2)

Being present, showing that one cares, and following the student in different arenas was emphasised as essential to getting to know the youths:

> I wake them up in the morning, meet them at school, and send messages about how it went on the test. (Social worker, FG 3)

Establishing contact and keeping in touch with the students were prerequisites for uncovering challenges and building confidence. The efforts to keep in contact with the students also involved confronting them and winning their trust:

> I am not afraid to talk to the youth at all. If I get worried, I go into the lodge. I ask very directly too. If I am worried that someone is suicidal, I ask (…) and if I think it could be an eating disorder or sign of something like that, then I ask. Youths are very relieved when you ask. You will know if someone has a broken heart over lost love and is not attending school (…) My experience is that the students trust me (…) Even though I know, not all have to know. The class teacher does not need to know all I know, but they need to know that this student needs some slack (…) It is about the dignity of the student. (Teacher/school adviser, FG 2)

Despite their comprehensive efforts, the professionals had several experiences with failing to prevent students from dropping out of school. Moreover, they reported examples of a student staying "under the radar" or slipping past their attention:

> Most of the week is used for getting hold of youths and talking to them. Often, there are some youths we have to be in a position to assist, and we never get in touch with them. For example, yesterday I wrote a report about school interruptions for a girl I had never met. Of course, we also have some sick youths in institutions - who never manage to get to school. (Teacher/school adviser, FG 3).

Giving the student time

The second strategy described in the focus groups was "giving the student time". Some of the participants described relationships with students lasting for several years. Essential to this strategy were efforts to provide students with alternative options, including being flexible and giving them continued support:

> When students do not come to school but instead stay at home, the most important thing is to give them time to think, keep in contact with them, offer support, and motivate them to return and remain in school. (Teacher/school adviser, FG 3)

Participants experienced that students renewed their motivation to continue school when given time to reconsider. Instead of pushing students, "giving the student time" was a sensitive wait-and-see approach to developing a deliberate and validating interchange with the student:

> Some of the youth I talk to say, 'I'm not motivated'. So, I say, 'It is okay to take a year and do something completely different. We can see if there is a job for you'. It is all about not pushing the youth into school (…) they may come back with motivation after a year or two. (Supervisor, FG 3)

Some students needed time before they returned to school because they had to overcome their health-related challenges:

> Students also come by, 'Can I talk to you?' Then they talk about suicidal thoughts and plans to end their lives. So, of course, there is not much time to think about school in a situation like that. So then it is about getting help (…) to get an appointment with the general practitioner and child welfare services (…), so there are many things we must investigate. (Teacher, FG 1)

Other students needed time to mature and took several years to complete school. Providing time to mature in combination with continuous support was considered

particularly important for the students from rural communities who had to move away from home to attend school:

> I see the most significant challenge with the youngest who move away from home the first year (…), so they get more support the first year. I think the youth mature more between the first and second years. (Social worker, FG 3)

> Some students may return after a year (…) because they need a little more time, they might be doing something else. When they have matured after a year, got rid of some baggage, sorted out things a little bit, then returned to school – many, but not all, of course. (Supervisor, FG 2)

For other students, who were less motivated, the participants expressed hope that time away from school would be a more boring option than continuing in school:

> Sometimes unmotivated students, or less motivated students, quit. I will let them stay at home for a week or two. Then I call and ask, 'Do you want to come back?' This is, of course, to get them back. When they have been home for one or two weeks, they may discover that it is not as fun as they first believed. Often, they come back, but maybe only half the time. (Teacher/counsellor EPS, FG 1)

Also, for these students the participants were available (cf. "then I call and ask … "). Furthermore, the participants also considered "giving time" to be an opportunity for the student to reconsider and potentially change his or her path:

> We had a student who did not complete school, so we arranged an internship for a few months until school started again. This was a girl with a Sami background (…) it was like she got a little more mature each year. She suddenly arranged a job herself, and now she is thinking about the fall term (…) she shows initiative. Some might need time to consider what to do. Then they might think, 'I have to do something'. That is a good thing, maturing for a year. (Supervisor, FG 2)

When "giving students time", the participants did not remain passive but maintained contact with the students, although this was not part of their job descriptions. They considered it appropriate to exceed their job descriptions to give support to the youth:

> It is outside the job description, but I have informed the administration that I made an appointment with a student. I will call in a week to know how the student is doing. Some students return, while others do not. (Teacher/counsellor EPS, FG 1)

This excerpt expresses the participant's hope and conviction that it is never too late. Unfortunately, giving students time was not always a successful strategy for keeping them in school. Nonetheless, the professionals considered the time spent with the students as valuable:

> We only succeed with some of the youths; we have to admit it. However, in any case, we spend time with the student, and spending time is essential. (Teacher/school adviser, FG 3)

Transparent environment

The participants pointed out that a transparent environment facilitates the deployment of strategies to detect and support students at risk of dropping out of upper secondary school. In addition, transparency was considered more attainable in smaller school environments. In smaller environments, it was easier to know each student and to establish connections between the right actors and students who needed support at an early stage:

> In a bigger school, we only know some of the students. For example, the time they should be in a class or not, or why they are in the hallway. It is not natural to ask them about this. It is different in a smaller school; it is more transparent in a way, which gives an entirely different overview, even of those who are not there (…) and maybe because it is a small school the youth feel more seen. (Health nurse, FG 3)

Early intervention was considered more attainable in the smaller schools, partly because of the acquaintances between professionals and the general overview they have of the students. Moreover, the professionals also worked in the same building or near each other, and it was therefore easy to make contact with the students naturally:

> We are a small school, after all, and we can initiate measures at an early stage. Thus, we can work individually and close, which is an element that contributes to success. (Teacher/school adviser, FG 2)

Transparent environments in the schools also facilitated early intervention and interdisciplinary collaboration. In the smaller communities with relatively high transparency, the professionals knew each other and were aware of each other's areas of competence. Transparency was particularly evident in the two focus groups in the smaller schools (FG 1 and FG 2):

> In a transparent environment, we might see at an early stage when there is something wrong with the students. However, it is not the students who come and ask for help. Often, the teachers or staff working in the administration inform us about students that should be followed up. Consequently, when professionals are all

in the same hallway - it is easy to communicate with each other. (Teacher, FG 1)

The transparency of a smaller school environment was presented as particularly important for students from rural communities who had moved away from home to attend upper secondary school:

I work closely with the schools. I am familiar with all the students who start at upper secondary school. We consciously push our students to smaller schools, preferably with support for dorm life. It is desirable that someone is around them and maybe wakes them up in the morning. (Social worker, FG 3)

Transparent school environments allowed teachers and their collaborators to catch students at an early stage who needed support and to capture their needs. Moreover, interdisciplinary collaboration and information flow were considered easier in smaller schools.

Interdisciplinary collaboration

In all three focus groups, the participants emphasised the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration to detect and support students at risk of dropping out of upper secondary school. In addition, the complexity of the students' challenges necessitated interdisciplinary collaboration and knowledge about available professional resources:

A student began to drop out, I called the doctor, I talked to the teachers, psychologist, and general practitioner (…). So, now the student has backing and is undertaking an apprenticeship. (Health nurse, FG 3)

However, participants in the urban school considered it challenging to have a comprehensive overview of the various services and professionals that could be relevant collaborators and supporters. Consequently, different agencies and services with different locations made it challenging for the professionals to know each other:

In some cases, several professionals are working with the same youth, and we do not know about one another. (Teacher/school adviser, FG 3)

The participants emphasised the interdisciplinary meetings and conversations between teachers, parents, psychologists, and physicians as crucial for success. The participants did not just experience the need for interdisciplinary collaboration within the school system, but also between the school system and the healthcare system:

We as therapists have to work in different contexts, in environments where the student is. We cannot work solely on treating depression inside the office, so we must work with the whole context. Things are connected. To bring a process of improvement, we must work in many different areas and collaborate with the school, the student, and the parents. We try to motivate the student to persist and try a little more. (Nurse in mental health care, FG 2)

Furthermore, the participants emphasised an extensive need for collaboration between relevant actors so that adequate information follows the individual in order to ensure continuity in transitions. Information flow in transitions could be a challenge, both in smaller and larger communities:

We work with the same youths, families, and children. Despite this, we cannot communicate about issues. All this happens during the children's schooling from ages 0 to 24. So, in hindsight, we see where we are failing. We already know that we do not have a system that ensures the discovery of children at risk. It is random, so this randomness must be eliminated. We need a system. (Counsellor NLWA, FG 1)

Cultural competence

Participants in FG 1 indicated that cultural competence was vital in their prevention practice. In this view, participants emphasised the importance of understanding the students' cultural backgrounds when designing strategies to prevent dropout. For example, one of the participants said how she draws on her knowledge about traditional reindeer herding when motivating students to remain in school:

A student told me, 'It is not so important with the common subjects'. I answered: You will probably be writing applications when working with reindeer, so you must have some education. Also, you need mathematics for the business assignment and things like that. (Teacher/counsellor EPS, FG 1)

The participant's knowledge of Sami culture was also emphasised as essential when discussing and involving the students' parents in the dropout prevention strategies. For example, one participant had experienced conflicting interests between a student and the parents concerning the student's future in reindeer herding. While the parents wished that the student should engage in the family business, the student wished to continue school:

I had conversations with the mother and son; the mother wanted her son to start herding, but the boy did not want to. So, I negotiated, 'What is best for both of you?' (Teacher/counsellor EPS, FG 1)

The participants in FG 1 adapted their strategies based on Sami ethnicity and culture and included Sami youths

and their parents in educational conversations when it was appropriate.

Registration based on ethnicity is prohibited in Norway. Therefore, the participants at the large school (FG 3) were unaware of whether students had a Sami background. However, the small schools belonged to small municipalities (FG 2 and 3), so the professionals mainly had an overview of ethnicity. Finally, in FG 2 and FG 3 some participants did not experience any difference between Sami and Norwegian students. Therefore, Sami students were not assessed differently than ethnic Norwegians in the follow-up during school years.

Discussion

This study explored the strategies that upper secondary school teachers and their collaborators employ to prevent dropouts from upper secondary school among Sami youths in northern Norway. The participants described two main strategies – "tracking the student" and "giving the student time". While the first strategy was proactive, a sensitive wait-and-see assessment characterised the second strategy. Both strategies were applied interchangeably, flexibly, and dynamically. The tracking strategy aimed to prevent dropouts by following up with students after early detection of dropout markers. The content in tracking the student was a sharp focus on students so that professionals could take early action to follow up with students who needed it. The proactive outreach the professionals took in tracking the students was based on obtaining an overview of the students, creating trust, and further adapting school objectives. The content in giving the student time was a slightly distanced contact strategy that could last for days, weeks, or even years. The time given, in some cases, could persist long after the student had dropped out. Hence, combined with regular contact and support, this slightly distanced contact strategy allowed the students to be deliberate and make new choices about their future educational objectives and gave them time to think, rethink, make up their minds, or mature.

Even though the two strategies are apparently contrasting and represent opposite ways of engaging with the student, they are used in an extensive intertwined process that involves identifying students at risk, assessing them, initiating problem-solving, providing support and time, and facilitating their return to school. Accordingly, these strategies demand continuous vigilance from the professionals, and measures have to be considered. Sometimes the professionals successfully deploy the two strategies to keep the students in school or make them return to school. But they also often fail to support students to continue and complete their upper secondary school.

The professionals tracked the students both in school life and in the student's free time and often by participating in activities outside their working hours. Suh, Suh, and Houston [69] pointed out that early identification of potential dropouts enables professionals to counteract dropout behaviour and help many students, complete school. The participants in our study were aware of students' absences and employed outreach, trust-building, and supportive measures to manage the challenge in youths' everyday life. Building trusting relations with the students was reported to be essential in the tracking strategy. Hence, the professionals built trust by participating in different arenas of the youths' everyday lives and supported them in transitions to other agencies or services when necessary. Trust building enabled professionals to acquire the necessary information and ultimately find suitable solutions to prevent students from dropping out. Horn [70] pointed out that trust between teachers and students is necessary because students at risk may experience disclosing information about their reasons for dropping out of school as shameful. The participants in our study spoke directly and asked students about their difficulties while protecting the student so that not all professionals acquire the information about the case. In line with Horn [70], our results demonstrate that building relationships that enable trust is essential. Overall, the tracking strategy involved supportive teaching, including helping students with their homework and enabling the students to gain control over challenging subjects or to pass their tests. Brandseth, Håvarstein, Urke, Haug, and Larsen [71] argue that supportive teaching significantly influences students' school participation. Buland and Mathiesen [72] emphasise that the teacher who sees and understands students and provides support at the right time is a crucial factor behind the choice between dropping out or staying in school.

In the previous research we have referred to, it is primarily the teachers' efforts in reducing the dropout rate at upper secondary schools that have been made clear. However, in our study we involved several professional groups that are in contact with students at risk of dropping out of upper secondary school. The professionals in our study extended their tracking strategy beyond the school context, and their presence in other contexts was highlighted as crucial to preventing dropouts. Many of the work activities the professionals undertook were neither required in their job nor included in their job descriptions. Horn [70] also demonstrated that teachers take on more responsibility than what is

required of them. The professionals in our study intervened in various contexts to create trust, make the youth feel safe, and acquire essential information about the youths' everyday lives. In that way they built relationships that enabled them to facilitate and support the students in continuing and completing their upper secondary school. The tracking strategy provides opportunities for the early detection of adversities. Bruce, Bridgeland, Horning Fox, and Balfanz [73] and Rumberger et al. [5] emphasise the importance of early detection of dropout indicators by continuously monitoring students' attendance, behaviour, and grades. Anvik and Gustavsen [74], Buland and Havn [75], Kristiansen and Skårberg [76], Thrana, Anvik, Bliksvær, and Handegård [77], and van Der Steeg, van Elk, and Webbink [78] also note that close monitoring of students who are at risk of dropping out of upper secondary school could reduce dropouts rates. Our study shows that early detection is not just a matter for teachers, but is an interdisciplinary matter. The "tracking the student" strategy involving close monitoring may make it possible for professionals to keep students in school.

The "giving students time" strategy was characterised by treading cautiously and not insisting or rushing to help students at risk of dropping out of school. This strategy was instead about balancing flexibility and perseverance and not leaving the students at risk entirely to themselves. Some students needed support and time. Sometimes it took years before some students who had dropped out returned to school, got a job, or engaged in other occupations, such as internships or training. The professionals gave time to students and used it actively to maintain contact with students at risk of dropping out of school. Professionals used the time to assess the appropriate approach and to consider appropriate ways of solving problems or facilitating for students. Motivating students was an active component of giving time, and the professionals continued to motivate students even while they were out of school for some time. A combination of giving the students time and continuing to motivate them is necessary to prevent dropout and achieve completion of school. As Markussen [1] points out, even if students do not complete every step on the ladder at upper secondary school, every step will count.

The success of the two main strategies described by the professionals was closely related to transparent environments and cultural competence. Accordingly, tracking and maintaining contact with students who had dropped out or who were at risk of dropping out was more manageable in a transparent environment that promoted interdisciplinary cooperation.

The data show that a transparent environment made it possible in an early stage to promote interdisciplinary cooperation, and students were more visible and thus easier to discover. Also, professionals could more easily be included in interprofessional collaboration because they had an overview of each other. For example, the organisation of the agencies was not in differentiated arenas but could be anchored in the same building or at least at a close distance. As a result, the cooperation between professionals could be entered into more quickly with the right professionals for a needy student. The data suggest that tracking the student in the student's leisure time to create trust was also more manageable in a transparent environment, especially in the two small schools. However, participating in the leisure arenas of the students became more of an inarticulate measure than one that was formally enlightened and recognised. However, with the large school there were varying distances between agencies and a reduced overview of the various services. Thus, the distance made it more challenging to enter into collaboration, e.g. it required a disproportionate time for transport. The time spent in transport and meetings restricted the professionals' availability for students. As remarked by the participants in our study, uncovering adversities and initiating appropriate measures to prevent dropouts requires cooperation between professionals. Our results concur with Rooney, Videto, and Birch [79], who note that interdisciplinary and inter-agency cooperation is often necessary to increase students' participation, performance, health, and well-being. Horn [70] points out that it is vital to co-organise the agencies and services into one contact point for the youths in order to eliminate the random approach to detecting and following up on students at risk of dropping out of school.

Some of our results indicate that cultural competence is an important factor in preventing dropouts in upper secondary school. Anderson, Bautista, and Hope [80] emphasise cultural competence as one of the most important predictors of building an alliance. Because registration based on ethnicity is prohibited in Norway, it is worth noting that some of the professionals in this study did not know which students had Sami backgrounds. In several cases, Sami youth and ethnic Norwegians were not assessed differently during their school years. However, Meld. St.16 [81] emphasises professionals' lack of cultural competence. Also, Eriksen et al. [82] point out that competence within the education system regarding Sami culture is limited. Many studies have underscored the importance of understanding the cultural settings, beliefs, and practices of people who receive support from professionals

[83–86]. The Sami's cultural understanding includes their language, their worldview, and a rich storytelling tradition [87–89]. Hedlund and Moe [90] and Melbøe [91] have claimed that understanding ethnic relations and cultural sensitivity is more important than ever in social work. According to Scorzelli and Reinke-Scorzelli [92], Mehus et al. [85], and Pohjola [86], professionals should be familiar with the norms, values, and attitudes of minorities. Cultural knowledge is essential in individual tailoring and adaptation, following Foronda [93]. Finally, adopting cultural competence in the strategies of tracking students and giving students time may be crucial to preventing dropout among Sami youths. Lacking cultural competence may hamper the individual tailoring of strategies to prevent dropout among Sami youth.

Conclusion

This study provides insight into the practices of professionals who support students at risk of dropping out of upper secondary school in Sami areas in northern Norway. The professionals adopted two main strategies in their efforts to prevent dropout. While the first strategy aimed at closely tracking students, the second aimed at motivating the students to remain in or return to school. The two strategies were used interchangeably and dynamically. The success of the strategies depended on the professionals' ability and opportunity to collaborate with students, parents, and each other and to participate in different contexts where the students live their lives. This study demonstrates the importance of transparent environments, interdisciplinary collaboration, and cultural competence in preventing dropouts from upper secondary school among Sami youth.

In this study, we have explored and discussed the strategies that upper secondary school teachers and their collaborators employ to prevent dropouts from upper secondary school among Sami youth in northern Norway. Several of these results will probably be recognisable to teachers and collaborators in non-Sami areas to prevent dropout. In the analysis of these findings emerges the importance of co-organisation among professionals in a transparent environment to make it easy to enter into interprofessional cooperation. A transparent environment and shortcuts to cooperation are highlighted as critical to preventing dropouts. Another criterion for success can be to have professionals who work across contexts and arenas where the youths spend their time, both inside and outside the schools. Also, suitable job descriptions of responsibility must be formalised. Moreover, insights into the

work practices can be used to improve institutional practices in the administration of professionals to prevent dropouts. Finally, it is important to facilitate development and time for teachers and their collaborators who want to engage in these practices.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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