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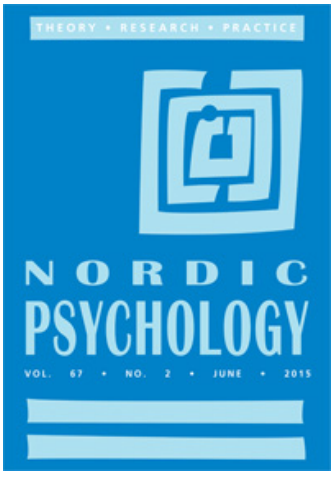

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Dropping out and a crisis of trust

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Abstract

This article focuses on the high dropout rate in the Danish vocational education system. The article seeks to analyse the dropout problem using the concept of trust. By taking this perspective on the dropout problem, the article seeks to replace the hitherto-dominant deficit of understanding within the Danish dropout research, which has focused on the so-called crisis of motivation in which students are regarded as lacking sufficient motivation to complete a vocational education. It is asserted that the strong focus on students' lack of motivation contributes to individualizing and psychologizing the dropout problem. On the basis of the concept of trust forwarded by thinkers such as Luhmann, the article seeks to redefine the dropout problem as a problem of trust, thereby aiming to introduce a more comprehensive and relational understanding of student dropouts. The assertion that trust and distrust are key dimensions of the dropout problem is supported by results from an interview study in which 108 Danish school students were interviewed on completion and dropping out and in light of a tangible account of the shift from a motivational to a trust-based perspective. Three conditions are set forth as central themes relative to the student dropout process. These are (1) the primary school's lack of relevance for a group of students, (2) the numerous free riders in vocational education and (3) a lack of work placement spaces.

Keywords: dropout, trust, VET education, learning

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Interest in vocational education in Denmark has risen considerably in some circles over recent years. This is primarily a result of the high dropout rates in vocational education, which has sparked concern regarding a potential rise in youth unemployment. In 2009, nearly 57,000 young people under the age of 25 began vocational education, and it is expected that 54% of these will complete their education. In 2009, 29,800 young people under the age of 25 completed a vocational education pursuit.[1] In other words, nearly half of those young people who start a vocational education pursuit never complete it.

In Denmark and the Nordic area, in general, there has been substantial research into the dropout problem, and much of this has made use of quantitative registry data. There are good grounds for analysing such quantitative registry data when seeking to gain an overview of dropping out, yet there is a general lack of a more overarching understanding of the actual processes that lead to dropping out (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009). In this article, we use our research into dropping out from the Danish vocational education system to set forth a framework for understanding the dropout problem in a processual manner, thereby clarifying students' perspectives on the actual dropout process. Prior to this, however, we briefly consider some of the general tendencies within Danish dropout research.

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The great crisis of motivation

In a Danish context, there has been relatively little research on dropping out from a processual perspective, and the main theoretical frame of these studies is seeing dropping out as a matter related to motivation (Brown & Katzenelson, 2011; Hutters & Katzenelson, 2012; Sørensen et al., 2013). There are, however, a number of Nordic studies that take a sociological approach to the dropout problem, emphasizing the students' socio-economic backgrounds and the influence that these have had on students' abilities to complete their education. The research here emphasizes that the dropout problem is clearly socially lopsided (Lundetræ, 2011; Marcussen, 2010). These studies that focus on the students' social and economic backgrounds do not focus on the processual perspectives on students' experiences with dropping out.

It is a general assumption in the Danish literature in the area that dropout processes in vocational education are inextricably linked with a lack of student motivation (Hutters & Katzenelson, 2012). It is claimed that a rising percentage of young people lack motivation is tired of school, and experience pressure and stress (Hutters & Katzenelson, 2012). The distance between the educational institutions' offerings and the needs of young people is manifested in a crisis of motivation, which is expressed in part by young people's lack of engagement with and eventual dropping out from their educations (Brown & Katzenelson, 2011; Hutters and Katzenelson, 2012; Sørensen et al., 2013). Various typologies of students are often produced and used as central tools for understanding young people's diverse motivations or strategies (e.g. see Jensen & Jensen, 2005; Katzenelson, 2008). When students in vocational education programmes drop out at high rates, as is currently the case, it is apparently because they lack the motivation to complete a vocational education (Hutters & Katzenelson, 2012; Sørensen et al., 2013).

This emphasis on motivation as the primary driving force for learning is present on a more general level in the complex of theories surrounding experiential pedagogy, and these theories act as the primary inspiration for the above-mentioned articles. The assumption,

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as Illeris (2012, p. 35) wrote, is that "one should orient oneself more toward how co-determination and dialogue can be used to build upon the foundations of motivation and experience that participants bring with them". The dimension of driving force, including motivation and engagement, is regarded as a highly important – if not the most important – aspect of learning. This creates a strongly individualized, humanistic psychological framework for considering the problem. If we accept this "diagnosis", there turns out to be much that does *not* play a significant role, including the actual education programme's academic content and the education programme's ability to transform students' lives.

But do Danish students generally lack motivation? There is much to suggest that such a conclusion should be modified and more closely defined. A questionnaire study on motivation among Danish school children concludes that "[t]he general picture is thus one in which most Danish students are properly motivated, yet there is also a relatively large group of students who display low motivation and do too little work in school" (Nordahl et al., 2010, p. 35). According to Nordahl et al. (2010, p. 43), this group consists mainly of boys (though with a degree of diffusion) who are bilingual and of Western/non-Western origin, and there is a close association between scholastic performance and motivation. In other words, if students are not interested in what they are taught, they do not perform well in school and vice versa. The study by Nordahl et al. (2010) also shows that Danish primary school students are different and have different motivations for attending school, so the "motivational problem" could actually be linked to social problems, including those associated with students' backgrounds and social classes. Researchers in other studies (Søndergaard et al., 2011) have argued for a temporal aspect of the motivational problem, namely that student motivation falls during upper-primary education. In other words, primary school students lose motivation particularly in the older classes. Despite the possibility that there is a crisis of motivation, it is problematic to use motivation as the primary explanatory framework for dropping out from vocational education and education in general.

In this context, we take a critical approach to the motivation-inspired position perspective on the dropout rate. We find that this position contains a degree of potential but also has significant problems when it comes to understanding the dropout problem on the basis of a motivational perspective. It is our ambition to theoretically re-frame the dropout phenomenon from being a problem understood within a humanistic theoretical frame of reference to a trust–distrust theoretical frame of reference. The interview process from which we have constructed the present article shows that the crisis is not primarily one of motivation but instead one of trust. By understanding the dropout problem as a crisis of trust for certain student groups in the educational system, we can understand the institutional interactions that transform students' trust into distrust, thereby potentially setting the dropout process in motion. The difficulty with conceptualizing the dropout problem as a crisis of motivation is that this casts the students as individuals who lack something – in this case, motivation. As a result, the institutions' task becomes that of planning educations in such a manner as to cause students to rediscover their motivation. In contrast, when the dropout problem is regarded as a crisis of trust, greater focus is placed on the relationship between the institution, surrounding society and the student, instead of the strong focus on what students apparently lack. A large proportion of students in our study do not trust or have very limited trust in the ability of educational institutions (in this case, for vocational education) to transform their lives from the status of being a student to that of being a member of society.

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The studies also show that vocational education programmes attract the students with the lowest average primary school grades (Ramsløv, 2013) as well as those whose parental educational background seems to guide young people's choice of education towards high school rather than towards vocational education programmes (Juul & Baadsgaard, 2011). This can be interpreted as an expression of parental distrust in vocational education's ability to offer students optimal possibilities relative to completing an education.

On the basis of a recently executed interview study and in light of a tangible account of the shift from a motivational to a trust-based perspective, we set forth three conditions as central themes relative to the students' dropout process. These are (1) primary school's lack of relevance for a group of students, (2) the numerous free riders in vocational education and (3) a lack of work placement spaces. These three themes are generated by an analysis of students' own accounts and experiences, as communicated to us through interviews. They also reflect a number of aspects that recur in the existing literature on dropout processes in youth education. Rumberger (2011) emphasizes that school processes and practices hold the most promise for understanding the dropout phenomenon (p. 197). We believe that our results are adding to the understanding of school processes and practices in relation to dropout. Later, we briefly discuss why it can be problematic to regard dropping out as a motivational problem, after which we set out the study's methodology before looking at the results and undertaking a clarifying discussion. With reference to the motivational problem, we first argue that there is an insufficient empirical basis for a motivational crisis of the extent to which the research suggests. We then argue that the psychologically oriented concept of motivation is poorly chosen inasmuch as it places focus primarily on the student. It is important to emphasize that we do find problems in the vocational educations but that these must be regarded as problems of trust.

Problems with the concept of motivation

The framework we chose for understanding the causes of dropping out is far from trivial. Notwithstanding the strengths of quantitative registry research, there is a tendency towards focusing on the importance of individual factors relative to dropping out (e.g. see Nielsen, 2011; Rumberger, 2011). This means that the dropout process itself turns into a kind of black box because the actual process is the result of a complex interplay between various personal, societal, cultural and economic aspects that can rarely be explained by focusing on individual factors (Sidorkin, 2008; Tanggaard, 2013). The concept of motivation opens up for more processual understandings of dropping out, yet we nevertheless regard the framework as one that creates new problems of its own. We can tentatively note the following problematic aspects:

It is the student who has the problem. By establishing the problem as one of motivation, the focus is turned on the student rather than on the educational system, contents of the teaching, teachers, administrators and finances. The problem within the educational system is thus attached to a particular group of participants in the system, while other groups and institutions are excluded from the problematizing complex (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Lee & Burkam, 2003). The assumption becomes that the young people lack the inner drive to acquire knowledge and that the key question is how to activate this inner drive. If we pose the question in behavioural terms, it can be formulated as the following: How do we give young people the desire to do what the educational institutions expect of them? It is a matter of particular groups of young

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people not living up to the expectations set for them by institutions. The actual content of the teaching and the organization of the educational institutions vanish from the analyses because student motivational problems are prioritized.

The concept of motivation is often poorly defined. Only rarely is the concept of motivation given a precise definition (Neher, 1991). Often, one encounters a common sense understanding that young people lack the inner drive to fulfil institutional expectations. In a review of research from the Nordic countries, Nordahl et al. (2010, p. 33) concluded that the field of research concerning motivation "does not have a particularly strong focus and prioritisation".

Organizational and political prioritizations become psychological deficiencies. When the motivational problem becomes the focus, instead of the explicitly or implicitly politically formulated and framed organizational practice of the schools and work placement sites, there is a tendency for the problem to take on a psychological character (Lee & Burkam, 2003; McDermott, 1993; Varenne & McDermott, 1998). Social, political, financial and educational problems are transformed and reduced to psychological processes in which students are deemed to be deficient. It is often assumed to be meaningful to differentiate between inner and outer motivation, and it is inner motivation in particular that students are deemed to be lacking. This causes the specific educational practice to slip out of sight, even though it is this practice that contributed to forming the problem in the first place and even though – as we see it – the issue does not primarily concern inner psychological motivational deficiencies.

From a crisis of motivation to a crisis of trust

Instead of regarding the dropout problem solely within the motivational research framework, this article argues that the concept of trust offers a much more productive framework for understanding why certain groups of students are not engaged by the educational system. As we set out later, the concept of trust focuses quite explicitly on the relationship between the student and the educational system. The point of departure is that the individual always has expectations of his or her surroundings. In other words, the student possesses certain expectations as to what the educational system can contribute to the life that he or she is presently living and the one that he or she hopes to live in the future. This is not a matter of the student lacking something. Instead, it is a matter of a suboptimal interplay between the student's expectations and the contributions of the institution, resulting in distrust. Trust places the problem in a contextual framework, and we emphasize that trust is mediated on a social level. Trust is thus linked to the individual's expectations of the institutional practice in which he or she participates, and relationships of trust are maintained when the institutional practice meets the expectations set by the individual.

Trust can be defined as a state of positive expectations of other people's actions and intentions. It has been argued that trust is a fundamental concept for modernity (Meyer et al., 2008). What makes trust special is that it plays a constituent role in highly complex modern society (Luhmann, 2000, p. 970).

In recent years, a number of studies have focused on trust and social relationships in schools (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001; Tarter, Bliss & Hoy, 1989; Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2011). It has been argued that trust is fundamental in social and institutional life (Bryk & Schneider, 2004; Lewis & Weigert, 1985; Luhmann, 1979; Pearson, Crane & Mont, 2005). In a significant study within the area, Bryk and Schneider (2004) have operationalized trust into

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a number of dyadic relationships. According to Bryk and Schneider (2004) the social life in school is organized around a distinct set of role relations: teachers with students, teachers with other teachers and teachers with parents and with their school principal (p. 20). Each party in a role relationship maintains an understanding of his or her role obligations and holds some expectations of the other. Maintenance and growth of relational trust in any given role require synchrony in these mutual expectations and obligations. For example, parents expect that teachers will take the necessary actions to help their children learn to read, etc. Schools work well as organizations when this synchrony is achieved within all of the major role sets that comprise a school community. Thus, Bryk and Schneider (2004) emphasized what according to Li (2012) can be called *expected* trustworthiness.

Trust, however, also involves a degree of risk because we, in our modern existence, cannot see through to the ultimate consequences of our actions, and trust is precisely the prerequisite for our ability to act. If we were to consider all that we do not know and that could potentially go wrong, we would be paralyzed. This also means that our actions primarily involve "taking a leap" (Luhmann, 1979), which requires trust that there is a well-organized world that will catch us if things go wrong. If we consider the consequences of Luhmann's and other scholars' thinking on trust and use this to focus on how distrust or lack of trust develops within the educational area, it becomes clear that the students no longer believe that educational institutions can transform their lives for the better. It is important to note that lack of trust leads to passivity or withdrawal, which is precisely what the dropout research often indicates as preceding a student's decision to drop out of his or her education (low level of engagement in school; Alexander, Entwisle & Kabbani, 2001; Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004).

In conclusion, we must recall that trust is generated and constituted on a social level. When others show trust in modern institutions, I do so as well. Based on Luhmann's notion of trust, we argue that distrust hinders "leaps of faith" and that distrust makes the participants withdraw themselves from engaging in uncertain and changing social practices (cf. Li, 2012). This may also be important to include in studies of difficulties in creating and maintaining trust in schools. By the same token, if I show trust, others will do so, too. The point for thinkers such as Luhmann is that most people possess a fundamental trust in the functioning of systems, which is the reason that the systems function to begin with. In other words, we place trust in trust.

Methodology

This article is rooted in an interview study of 160 vocational education students, which formed part of a larger research project into the dropout phenomenon in vocational educations (see Jørgensen et al., 2012 for more information). Interviews with the students were used as the empirical basis for this article. The interview study was divided into two rounds. The first round of interviews (the so-called primary pool of 106 interviews) sought to cover the breadth of the student group in terms of choice of study, means of entrance and student background, though emphasis was placed on the so-called dropout risks (i.e. students at risk of not completing their education). Selection of dropout risk students was undertaken on the basis of work carried out by Jensen and Humlum (2010), which took place in two stages. The goal of the selection was for around three quarters of the interview subjects to be ethnic minorities, gender minorities, from broken families, living alone or socially or psychologically vulnerable. It was also sought to include one-fourth non-dropout risk interview subjects in order to gain a broader understanding

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of what causes engagement in vocational education – in other words, not just among a selected minority group. In addition, a contrast group can show how the selected group is distinguished from or similar to other groups, in part to shed light on the processes of social inclusion and exclusion. Nearly two-thirds of participants (64%) in the study were male, while one-third were female (36%). Interview participants ranged from 15 years old (1%) to 49 years old (1%), with most students being between 16 and 20 years old (84%). An average of only 19.87% of the students who took part in the study were of ethnic Danish origin, while 8% were of a non-Danish ethnic origin but with European roots. Five per cent were of non-Danish ethnic origin with roots outside of Europe.

The second round of interviews, which started in 2010, consisted of 54 interviews (i.e. around half of the students in the primary pool), mainly selected according to which students from the first round of interviews ended up being dropout risks. In terms of the interviews themselves, an interview guide was produced, taking its point of departure in key assumptions concerning the study, leading to a focus on students' social backgrounds, their reasons for choosing a vocational education, their experiences with the school and their expectations for the future. The interviews were structured, and nearly all of the initial interviews lasted around 30 min, while the second-round interviews were of a somewhat longer duration. Initially, trust was not a theme directly enquired into during the interviews. During the first analysis of the interviews, it became clear, however, that trust was a central theme, one to which the interview subjects often returned. Because of this, an analytical category was formulated on the basis of a series of essential characteristics described in the student interviews concerning the relationship between trust and dropping out. Taking analyses of the empirical data as a starting point, various theories and theoretical studies concerning the relationship between trust and dropping out were reviewed in order to make the analytical categories more precise. Finally, all student interviews were analysed on the basis of the analytical categories concerning trust and dropping out that had been set forth in the first round of analyses and the review of relevant literature on the subject (see above). The interview subjects received written information on the framework for and aims of the interview, including information on the principles of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity. The interviews were all transcribed either by the interviewer or by scientific assistants. They were then analysed with the use of the qualitative data processing programme Nvivo 9, primarily based on the common themes and assumptions that structured the interviews and that also formed the basis for this article.

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Construction of educational distrust

We now provide examples of what we characterize as educational distrust. We identify educational distrust as a result of certain groups of students repeatedly experiencing that the educational system has not lived up to their expectations for it. The point we wish to emphasize is that "the crisis of motivation" is not a mysterious phenomenon but is instead an expression of the educational system failing to fulfil these groups' expectations. The students have lost faith in the educational system's ability to transform their lives. The withdrawal, passivity, and – in some cases – dropouts that the educational system encounters from certain groups of students should largely be understood as a consequence of the way in which the system is designed. In this context, we place particular emphasis on the fact that some students encounter the

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primary school as being of limited academic relevance for what they are learning at vocational school. At the same time, these students have difficulty finding work placements and only receive limited assistance from the vocational schools in finding the work placements that they desire.

Primary school as educationally irrelevant

The interviews with vocational school students displayed a clear pattern in which students contrasted vocational school with primary school. A large number of the students interviewed regarded primary school as boring and lacking in educational relevance. This means that a large group of students possesses generally low expectations for going to school, and they take this distrust with them to vocational school. They do not feel that primary school can transform their lives, with the consequence that that the more scholastic these students feel their vocational education to be, the less trust they have in its ability to lead them to their initial goals for their education. This is precisely the tendency expressed in our empirical material. In those cases in which the vocational school resembles a workplace, with practical teaching in trade subjects, students speak of a feeling of trust in the education leading them to their educational goals. By the same token, when students encounter primary school-like teaching at the vocational school, they often also regard it as being of little relevance to their further education. One example of how the interviewed students feel about primary school is provided by Sofie, a carpentry student:

> I: How do you feel about going to primary school?
>
> T: Phew. Frankly speaking, I didn't feel good about it at all. Yeah, it wasn't totally cool. Not because I had social problems or anything, but I'm really, really, really bookbored. I get tired of reading books and that sort of thing really quickly and would rather get out there and do something. (Sofie, carpentry student.)

Primary school is not a place where most of the interviewed students have experienced bullying or social exclusion, nor is it a place that they regard as educationally relevant. Primary school is described as being too scholastic and bookish relative to the expectations that they, like Sofie, have for their education.

A considerable majority of students in the interview study described the transition from primary school to vocational school as a significant break. They had found most of the teaching in upper-primary school classes to be theoretical, bookish and lacking in relevance to the lives they wished to lead and the work they hoped to perform. In the vocational educations, however, students felt that they were working with something relevant, and they felt inspired by the teaching in the workshops. It is less a case of students criticizing primary school, *per se*, than a case of them deeming it to be too bookish. Our interview study also shows that a proportion of students begin planning on a vocational education already in their final years of primary school, and it is particularly these students who feel that primary school cannot offer them anything to help realize this dream. There is much evidence, however, to suggest that students take this lack of trust in traditional school teaching with them from primary school to vocational school. Another aspect of the vast majority of interviews with vocational school students is that these students regard the teachers they encounter in their vocational educations as professionally skilled, and they are enthusiastic about their skills:

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I: Do you also feel that they're engaged in their teaching?

T: Yes, that's what I feel at any rate. She talks a whole lot about it doing good work, and now you should stay, and now you should just . . . She talks really well about it so that you want to go out there and get to work. It's infectious. (Trine, painting student.)

Other students as problematic

In the interviews, many students claimed they felt that a large number of students who did not feel like being in the educational programme or who were only in the program because it allowed them to receive state support were a contributing factor in diminishing students' engagement and trust in the vocational education. There is much evidence to suggest that the proportion of students who are undecided regarding their education has raised within vocational education programmes over the past 15 years (Munk & Park, 2012). The group of disengaged students at the vocational school is a point of discussion in nearly all of the student interviews. In many cases, it is almost as though distrust and lack of engagement on the part of disengaged students rubs off on those students who had previously been highly engaged. In one interview, this is expressed as follows:

C: OK, so what you're saying is that a lot of them who are starting their education are tired of school.

D: Yes, it's just for the state support, some of them.

C: Does that also make you less motivated?

D: Yeah, totally. Deep down inside, I really want to get out of this class.

C: Because too many of them can't be bothered to work?

D: Yes. (Kasper, basic vocational course student.)

Besides the apparently infectious lack of engagement, there is a tendency for the image of the vocational school itself to sustain damage from those students who are not aware of what the school can grant them access to. For a large proportion of the interviewed students, it is clear that the undecided students signal that vocational education is the type of education you choose if you do not know what else to do. The admission and presence of these numerous disengaged students at vocational schools indicates vocational education's low social and academic status. Similarly, students experience a tendency towards differential treatment, with disengaged students who do not uphold the common institutional rules – for instance, concerning absences from school – receiving special positive treatment. One student said:

K: And then they show up every so often, and then they're a bit unfocused, and they sometimes disrupt teaching and that sort of thing. And they're absent a whole lot, and that can disrupt teaching and that sort of thing. And so I honestly just think they should be expelled, seeing as they don't really want to come here, and they get way too many chances, and I think they should change that. (Lisbeth, basic vocational course student.)

Generally speaking, the interviewed students realized that when those students who are often absent are nevertheless permitted to remain in the education, it is due to financial considerations, and they felt that this creates a high degree of distrust in one's ability to learn

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anything valuable from such an over-inclusive educational system (see also http://avisen.dk/unge-teknisk-skole-er-for-tabere_161121.aspx).

Lack of work placement spaces

The final dimension in which the trust–distrust perspective plays a role is linked to the lack of work placement spaces within the vocational educations. At the time of this writing, there are approximately 7000 too few apprenticeships, which obviously contribute to students developing a lack of trust in the ability of the vocational education system to transform them from being students to being employees or tertiary education students with a vocational education background. It is a fundamental characteristic that only a minority of those students who were interviewed possessed a work placement and that the lack of work placement spaces are thus a key reason for students dropping out of vocational educations. For instance, two students claimed the following:

> M: At the start of the education, there were more of us. Some have dropped out. Either because they couldn't afford starting the school placement or just because they thought it was too rough getting so many rejections. (Morten, bricklayer student.)

> S: There's nothing wrong with the start of the education in itself, and it's not that I don't want to be a smith, but there aren't enough work placement spaces. (Søren, smith student.)

The interviews made it clear that the difficulty in finding a work placement affects students attending the school-based proportion of the vocational educations. There is a tendency for teachers to communicate an understanding that it is difficult to find a work placement, and this sense of hopelessness spreads among the students, who get the feeling that there is no real value in bothering to look for a work placement at all. The prospect of lack of work placement spaces available results in students feeling that they cannot move on within the vocational education system. The exchange education principle in the vocational education system (combining both work placement and school time) in Denmark has many advantages, including providing students with practical skills in the workplace and preventing students from being pushed out into working life unprepared. However, the transition from the start of the education at school and the main proportion of the education in work placement at a company represents a major change that needs to be accomplished as part of the education. In this context, it is largely up to the students themselves to find work placements, and if it turns out that there are very few work placement spaces available, it will result in students losing trust in the ability of the vocational education system to transform their lives. There are thus structural mechanisms within the system itself that occasion significant dropout risks. For instance, the state of the market and administrative obstacles can lead to a lack of work placement spaces. Distrust in the system itself can develop quickly, regardless of whether or not a student is motivated to pursue his or her education. The problem is that the more we seek the reasons for dropping out in individuals (as occurs when the phenomenon is explained on the basis of individualized personal problems or lack of motivation), the less inclined we are to find structural solutions to the challenges involved in the massive ambition to educate as many people as possible in an age when untrained work is rapidly disappearing.[2] Thus, the motivational explanations for dropping out risk is paralyzing us in terms of making structural

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changes and ensuring that innovative reorganizations of the vocational educational system are not carried out.

Discussion and conclusion

As emphasized earlier, the attempt to explain dropping out on the basis of motivational processes is, in many senses, a step forward relative to more static models, in which dropping out is understood as a mechanical consequence of particular deterministic factors, such as socio-economic and demographic conditions. The concept of motivation, however, tends to explain dropping out from an individualized perspective. Dropping out becomes a deficiency in the individual, one that we can hope to replace with desire, motivation and engagement, potentially with the help of new teaching methods and materials. While they could, indeed, potentially prompt more motivation in students, individualized explanatory models risk placing the primary responsibility for the lack of learning or lack of education on the shoulders of the individual. If, on the other hand, the overarching problem is one of a crisis of trust, this suggests that dropping out should be regarded as a phenomenon that illustrates a relationship between the individual, institutions and society. If there are insufficient work placement spaces, perhaps there is good reason for students to distrust the school's ability to provide a future identity as a participant in the labour market. If schools are filled with students who have been forced to be there, who are coasting along on state aid, or who do not fit in some other way, the remainder of the students may develop distrust in their potential to learn. If the teaching models and institutional structures of primary school do not appeal to or meet the expectations of students (especially in the older classes), it is no wonder that such students opt out of school – either physically or in the form of passive participation. The concept of trust thus reflects dropping out in terms of the conditions that students encounter in their upbringings and within the educational system. It emphasizes the necessity of taking responsibility for students in this broader sense. In other words, dropping out becomes a distributed process that develops in the encounter between the student and the institution. From our perspective, this kind of explanatory model for understanding is necessary for the development of new and radically different dropout initiatives than those represented by activities like individualized coaching and psychological help. Furthermore, it is worth noting that many of the isolated dropout initiatives that are launched to strengthen students' motivation (sports, breakfast, mentors, etc.) play only a limited role in students' consciousness concerning what is important for the completion of their studies. When asked about the various dropout initiatives, students do not regard such initiatives as influential in terms of their desire to continue in or change their education. An analysis of the specific reasons that students give for changing their education shows the isolated dropout initiatives to be irrelevant in students' decisions. Talented and engaged teachers and students in the education programmes as well as a close association between scholarship and practice count for much more when it comes to students' deliberations concerning completion.

As a result, from the perspective of trust, we could envision new forms of societal and business responsibility in terms of, for example, work placement problems. When municipalities fail to accept more apprentices than usual despite a construction boom, there is evidence of a problem of trust. Either the companies and the municipalities distrust the ability of potential students, or we, as citizens, distrust the ability of companies and municipalities to fulfil their part

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of societal educational responsibility. On the one hand, the strength of vocational education rests in its closeness to practice and to education within companies. On the other hand, this link to the labour market presents problems in terms of the premise that it is actually possible to include and educate all young people simply by "stuffing" more of them into the existing system without fundamentally altering or innovating the system in light of the changed priorities. If a primary school fails to create a learning environment that meets the expectations of "school-weary" or crafts-oriented students, this represents a societal problem concerning access to learning. If the vocational education programmes become mere depots for students who cannot otherwise be prepared for education, we need to discuss the role of the vocational education programs. To determine that the reasons for dropping out are solely related to students' insufficient motivation and inner psychological issues is, from this perspective, quite close to evading responsibility. As long as motivation remains a dominant model for understanding dropping out among researchers, educators and the media, students will be offered no other opportunity for explaining their own deficient educational behaviour than by referencing their own insufficient motivation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

NOTES

1. http://www.uvm.dk/Uddannelser-og-dagtilbud/Erhvervsuddannelser/Fakta-om-erhvervsuddannelserne/Erhvervsuddannelserne-i-tal
2. http://politiken.dk/debat/analyse/ECE1452791/370000-ufaglaerte-job-er-forsvundet-paa-20-aar/.

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