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# Improving completion rates in adult education through social responsibility

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## Abstract

Dropout is a serious problem within education. This article reports on an intervention project, entitled new roles for the teacher - Increased completion rates through social responsibility, which sought to reduce non-attendance and dropout rates in the Danish adult educational system by improving teachers' competences. This goal was pursued by engaging teachers in training programs aimed at improving their relational competences. The data showed that these focused training programs have an effect on the educational culture at the colleges, and on the teachers' attitudes towards the importance of reducing dropout rates. As a consequence, the teachers acted more consistently and purposefully to prevent dropout and a positive effect of the intervention on dropout rates was documented.

Key words: adult education, teacher training, dropout, completion, retention.

### Improving completion rates in adult education through social responsibility

Educational dropout is a global issue and a serious problem in many countries (Lamb, Markussen, Teese, Sandberg, & Polesel, 2011). As such, questions of why adult students drop out of the educational system and how to prevent this are vital and relevant within educational research.

Existing research has identified a number of significant factors related to dropout (Jeffrey et al., 2011; McGivney, 2003; Rumberger, 2011; Rumberger & Rotermund, 2012), although some studies call for more evidence-based research (Valentine et al., 2011). A comparative study of 13 OECD countries summarizes there are a multitude of reasons for dropping out, however, "the most important predictive variables are found to be more or less the same in nearly all the countries" (Markussen & Sandberg, 2011, p. 403-404). In a literature review on dropout, Rumberger and Rotermund (2012) concluded "dropping out is more of a process than an event" and "no single factor can completely account for a student's decision" (p. 491).

The general picture is that dropout is caused by both external and internal factors, and often interplays between the two. For example, a students' financial situation is considered an external factor (Fries, Göbel, & Maier, 2014). Meanwhile, internal factors may be divided into three categories: students' abilities, aptitudes and level of engagement (Lamote, Speybroeck, Van Den Noortgate, & Van Damme, 2013; Van Bragt, Bakx, Bergen, & Croon, 2011), study conditions and classroom environment (Darkenwald & Gavin, 1987; Fincher, 2010), and teachers' performance and competences (Lippke, 2012).

Students' abilities, aptitudes and dispositions, and internal factors within the college have been shown to play an important role in relation to dropout. Polesel, Nizinska, and Kurantowicz (2011) noted those who drop out of adult education are often educationally neglected, have low self-esteem and lack of faith in their own capacities. These issues require particular support in educational settings if they are to be addressed successfully, meaning adult education providers have to play a socio- and psycho-therapeutic role for potential dropouts (Polesel, Nizinska, & Kurantowicz, 2011, p. 363). Lack of academic self-efficacy is likewise related to dropout (Bujack, 2012). Based on a review of 25 years of research, Rumberger and Lim conclude that contexts matter, and 'supportive relationships in families, schools and communities have a positive effect on dropout (Rumberger & Lim, 2008, p. 3). McGivney (2003) noted "all the evidence indicates that good staff-student interaction is one of the keys to good retention rates'"(p. 134).

### **Assumptions and Purpose**

Existing research suggests that adult education teachers can influence students' decision making processes regarding dropout. However, not much research has been done in this field. In this study, we assume that developing teachers' ability to generate positive social relationships

and to focus on each student's performance will have a positive effect on the student's engagement.

As a consequence it may be assumed that increasing teachers' competences, particularly their relational competence, will reduce non-attendance and dropout rates. It may also be assumed that the necessary competence could be achieved through teacher training programs. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate whether teachers can be trained to improve their relational competence and to what degree an improvement of this competence leads to a decline in non-attendance and dropout rates among adult students.

### **The study and context**

As part of a national program to reduce dropout in general adult education, this study focused on reducing dropout rates in adult education programs by supplying teachers with new relational competences. Launched in 2012 and lasting three years, the project took place at five adult education colleges providing general adult education at lower-secondary level (AVU) and upper-secondary level (HF). The project involved 494 teachers and more than 10,000 students. Approximately 20 teachers from each college were directly involved and participated in the teacher training program. These are referred to as *core* participants. The remaining teachers, about eighty teachers at each college, were involved in the competence development process in different ways, and in knowledge sharing activities. These are referred to as *other* teachers.

#### **The cause variable: teacher competence**

The objective of the intervention was to improve and expand the teachers' role towards a greater focus on relational competence and actions. Relational competence is understood as the teachers' ability to create and support positive relationships between teacher and student, and between students. Relational competence includes the ability to use and integrate knowledge about students' aptitudes, abilities and dispositions in student interactions. As such, it concerns the teachers' ability to gain knowledge of the students' proficiency, social and psychological dispositions, and act accordingly, both inside and outside the classroom. The concept includes a classroom management perspective and the ability to create a positive and stimulating learning environment.

To obtain these competences, the teachers participated in a training program consisting of various courses and coaching sessions focusing on two main themes: a) knowledge of students' differing abilities, aptitudes and dispositions, b) classroom management, focusing on relational

competence and conflict management. The program had a total duration of five working days and was conducted over a period of ten months. Actions related to the implementation of the training program also had a total duration of five days.

### **Research design**

The study utilizes a mixed method design (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Yildirim, 2015) in order to describe what happens and then how and why it happens (Cohen, Manion, & Morriison, 2011).

The qualitative data sources are interviews and logs providing knowledge of the scope and content of the teachers' new and more comprehensive relational activities. The interviews explore the teachers' perceptions of the teacher training program during their participation, and their experiences with transforming new knowledge into new actions. The logs contribute knowledge about what the teachers actually do in their classes during the period in which they keep a log. Also, they provide an opportunity to capture the teachers' reflections on their relational actions in the classroom immediately after carrying them out.

The purpose of the quantitative part of the study is to measure the development of attitudes and actions in the total group of teachers. In addition, this part of the study describes the development of the students' non-attendance and dropout rates over a five year period both for the five colleges involved in the project and for four other colleges used as a control group.

### **Data collection**

**Qualitative data.** Interviews with two core teachers from each of the five colleges were carried out three times during the intervention period; at the beginning, in the middle and at the end. Each college selected two teachers to participate in the interviews based on their affiliation with respectively lower-secondary level (AVU) and upper-secondary level (HF) and their

involvement in the overall competence development program. Based on the individual teachers' involvement in the development process and participation in the training program, all respondents were appointed by the college management. The interviews were conducted as semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions and lasted 60 minutes each. In the interview guides there were three main areas: 1) the teachers' perceptions of what they had learned during the program, 2) how this learning affected the teachers' perceptions of their new role and responsibilities regarding student retention, and 3) which new initiatives the teachers took after they had completed the program to prevent or reduce student dropout.

Written logs were produced by two teachers from each college over a period of eight weeks midway through the project. The teachers participating in this part of the survey were also appointed by the management based on their activity in the project, and all ten participants had completed the training program. Each teacher was asked to prepare one weekly log entry describing three items: 1) the relational activities which the participants carried out during their teaching, 2) the teachers' assessment of the effects of the activities on the students and on non-attendance and dropout rates and 3) to what extent these activities were new in comparison to the teachers' previous practice.

**Quantitative data.** The quantitative data consists of (a) a survey of the teachers' perceptions of their new competences and actions, and (b) registrations of students' non-attendance and dropout rates over a five-year period.

The survey was filled out by all the teachers at the five colleges at the beginning and two years into the intervention period. The survey encompassed 15 questions related to the teachers' self-reported competences and to the teachers' actions in the classroom. Two Likert scales were constructed: an 8-item survey on relational competence with a 5-point scale and a 7-item survey

on relational actions, also with a 5-point scale. The total population consisted of 494 teachers, and the response rate was 69%.

The second set of quantitative data included a systematic registration of non-attendance and dropout rates for a cohort of more than 10,000 students calculated after a common standard for the five colleges. Data on attendance and dropout was systematically drawn from the registers at each of the five participating colleges for each year from 2009/10 to 2013/14. The years from 2009 to 2012 thus constitute the baseline for the project, while data from the last two years show the impact of the project. Data on dropout was also gathered from four other colleges in Denmark. These colleges were similar to the intervention colleges in terms of size, student demographics, and degree of urban setting. These data enable a comparison between participating and non-participating colleges.

The data is compiled in two different datasets, one for each of the study programs at the colleges: General adult education programs at lower-secondary level (AVU) and upper-secondary level (HF). Both study programs are organized in single subject courses. Because non-attendance and dropout rates are normally assessed in different ways at the different colleges, the datasets have undergone an extensive and comprehensive validation process. To ensure comparable figures, a standard procedure was developed.

### **Data Analysis**

**Qualitative data.** All interviews were transcribed before a grounded analysis based on the main areas to be explored during the semi-structured interview was performed. The interview guides for all three rounds were the same and addressed the above mentioned three main areas.

Our analytical perspective on the interviews and the logs has been on change and development over time.

**Quantitative data.** For analyzing the survey-data a paired samples t-test was employed to measure the development of each item on the two scales. All analyses were differentiated between core participants and the rest of the teaching staff. For tests of core participants an alpha level of 0.10 was used to determine statistical significance, while an alpha level of 0.05 was used for tests of other teachers.

### **Findings**

There were two main themes emerging from the qualitative data: (a) need for a new vocabulary and b) need for a more holistic approach.

**Need for a new vocabulary.** A central aspect of the competence development program is the establishment of a common theoretical vocabulary among the teachers. This is useful as a foundation for example to base reflections on how to act towards different types of student. The teachers have not only gained new understanding of student behavior, they also feel competent to act on it. One teacher stated “Times have changed. We can no longer only relate to the subject matter. Today, we have to be much more open in order to include all the students.”

When students seem reluctant or unwilling to participate in class, for example, instead of dismissing it as laziness, teachers now look for possible reasons, such as a fear of speaking in front of other students. The teachers’ awareness of such issues makes it possible for them to work with new methods to cope with reluctance, e.g. by using appreciative pedagogics. The teachers describe how initiatives like these have improved the spirit of solidarity among students and are thereby expected to reduce dropout rates.

Another theory, that teachers found particularly inspiring when working to integrate relational competence and actions into their existing teacher practices, was classroom management theory because it offers insights into how to develop new relationships with students, as well as into the impact of positive relationships in terms of establishing both an academic culture and a social environment in which the students can thrive, and thereby be motivated to continue their studies.

**Need for a more holistic approach.** In order to accommodate positive relationships based on mutual respect and trust, the teachers state that they must pay greater attention and apply a more holistic approach to the students' overall life situation; their academic performance as well as their personal lives. A seemingly basic, but nevertheless utterly essential element is that the teachers show all their students that they 'see' them; that their presence is noticed; and, equally importantly, that their presence is of value not just for the students themselves but also for their fellow students.

“I have learned to think more about my role in relation to the students, e.g. I try to increase my contact with the individual student, both before and after class, and when I circulate in class...using comments where I step out of my role as a teacher and try to show a relationship between me and the student. I use it very deliberately to gain a more personal relationship with the students; it doesn't have to be all that profound, small talk is fine. It shows an interest in the student who feels 'seen'. It gives me a feeling of knowing them better, and also the ability to spot when something is wrong.”

The students are part of a community, and therefore have a responsibility to attend regularly, participate in lessons, and act responsibly e.g. in relation to group work where every

students' presence is needed. This finding is supported in an analysis of the dropout process which notes that the risk of dropping out may be reduced by means of a teacher 'shepherding [students] through the process of schooling' (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009). By contrast, it depersonalizes relationships if the teacher does not recall students' names or notice whether or not they were present for a given lesson.

"I'm much more aware of the effect of praising the students. The students grow mentally if you show them that you care. I'm thinking in relational competences. I'm telling them that they need to show up when the class starts. I make demands in terms of their performance."

### **Teacher competence and student relations**

Looking at the development of the specific relational competences in question, three competences stand out as having developed relatively more for all the teachers. These are: 1) the competence to 'cope with conflicts between students in your class', 2) the competence to 'give subject related appreciative feedback', and 3) the competence to 'speak to a student about his/her personal situation outside the classroom'.

For the core participants the three most prevailing changes in relational actions were: 1) to 'act upon discovering a student who is not thriving', 2) 'speak to a student about his/her well-being in college', and 3) 'speak to a student about his/her personal situation outside the classroom'. The following excerpt from one of the teacher's logs exemplifies all three points very well:

*"I had a class, where not many showed up on Friday morning. I asked the class to send a text message to the absentees to get the reason. Text messages usually work well. I also often stay in class at break time in order to find out what they are doing – and this seems*

*to work. Normally, it takes only a few minutes before one of them comes to me with issues, positive or negative, e.g. about a party, cars, our up-coming barbecue, problems with their father and mother who are divorced etc. Also, I'm often stopped in the corridors by students who need to talk to me for 5 minutes. I always allow time for that and at the moment, it is often about the students feeling depressed and stressed”.*

If we look at the non-attendance and dropout rates, the figures in tables 1-2 represents the two different study programs at the colleges. Looking at the figures for all five participating colleges, the average student non-attendance rate remains more or less constant for each of the two study programs. Compared to baseline figures, there is a decline in dropout rates at all five colleges for the two study programs during the intervention years. We do not find any systematic differences between the five colleges in terms of the trends in dropout rates.

As shown in tables 1-2, the decline from baseline to the second year of the project period varies between the study programs. At the upper-secondary level (HF), the decline is around 7 percentage points. At the lower-secondary level (AVU), the total dropout rates are lower from the outset, and consequently, there is a lower decline of around 3 percentage points.

The decline in the dropout rates is most significant in the first year of the invention period while the effect of the intervention seems to weaken in the second year. At the lower secondary level there is even a small rise of 1 percentage point.

For the four non-participating college a decline in the dropout rate is documented for the HF-program from baseline to the second year. However, this decline is only half of that from the participating colleges. For the AVU-program the dropout rate increases by 1 percentage point. When comparing development in dropout rates between the five participating colleges and the four other colleges, we can conclude that the figures are more positive at the five participating

colleges. This indicates that the decline in dropout rates is related to the intervention and not caused by other external factors.

### **Discussion and Implication for practice**

The qualitative data show that although the core teachers have been through the same competence development program, their actions afterward are very varied. They have personal ways of creating relations and taking action towards the students' different preconditions. The teachers do not use one particular method or commonly agreed upon measures. Social responsibility is practiced in many ways in the different classrooms. The crucial point is to create 'a more personalized learning environment, where students and teachers get to know and care for one another, not just as students and teachers, but also as people' (Rumberger, 2011, p.221-22). Because 'students who feel part of a supportive group are more likely to continue on a program of study than those who do not' (McGivney, 2003, p. 137). What seems to improve student retention is thus a collective agreement of the importance of reducing dropout and the general willingness to do something about it by developing relational competences and act accordingly.

It is interesting to notice that while non-attendance rates have been fairly constant during the intervention period, the dropout rates have been reduced. It seems that although students do not attend classes on a more frequent basis, there is an impact from the different activities in terms of the students' ability to complete their studies.

This result is surprising as it contradicts and expands the perspective from other findings e.g. Lamb et al., who points out the importance of school attendance and 'participation in the school life' and says: 'students who lose interest in school (school engagement)' are less likely to do well and have a higher risk to dropout (Lamb et al., 2011, p. 375-376).

We found a significant difference in dropout rates from the two study programs. At the lower-secondary program, it is noteworthy that the dropout rates are lower from the outset and the decline smaller. A tentative explanation may be that this program traditionally has had a

greater focus on the importance of positive relationships in the classroom and on the risks of dropout.

We can identify several significant effects of the teachers' competence development. First of all, the teachers state that they have become aware that dropout is an issue that must be addressed in their teaching practice; dropout is not simply a result of external factors and thus a process that teachers can help prevent if addressed in time. Secondly, and referring directly to the competence development program, the teachers state that they act on their new knowledge and perform new activities aimed at preventing dropout. Thirdly, the teachers voice the opinion that not only their new actions but also a common institutional focus contributes to a decline in dropout rates.

Our data support the original assumption that a competence development program and knowledge sharing activities among teachers can lead to a decline in student dropout. The general attitude within the teacher groups towards the importance of reducing dropout rates is of great significance for the effects.

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