



Article

Reengaging in their future: Students' experiences of preparedness for education and training after attending a transitional school year

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore how students describe their preparedness for education and training after attending the additional school year following lower secondary school. The main purpose of the additional school year is to prepare youths for upper secondary school. The aim is to increase their chances of completion by providing students with an adapted and flexible schooling arena. The target group are students who have completed lower secondary school but are at risk of early school leaving (ESL) due to numerous risk factors, such as low academic achievement, lack of a sense of belonging to the school, or lack of parental involvement. Little is known, however, about how students experience preparedness for future education after attending an additional school year. Drawing on the theoretical underpinnings of disengagement and re-engagement, the present study addressed this gap by examining how



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17 youths (age 16) attending the additional school year experienced readiness for future education and training. Data comprised individual interviews with youths in the target group. The reflexive and thematic approach to analysis indicated that students' experiences of preparedness were characterized by a process of re-engagement in the present and for the future, including social, academic, and practical preparedness. Preparedness is discussed as many-faceted, intertwined with affordances of alternative schooling, and a process of re-engagement. Implications for alternative and conventional schooling are discussed.

Keywords: Early school leaving, re-engagement, alternative schooling, additional school year, inclusion

Introduction

Through the theoretical lens of re-engagement, this paper discusses how students in Norway describe their preparedness for education and training after attending an additional school year.

Early school leaving (ESL) in upper secondary school is a major challenge in the Norwegian and international educational systems. Youths who do not complete upper secondary education constitute a particularly vulnerable group (Schmid, 2020). The life-course consequences of leaving school before obtaining formal qualifications are numerous; including unemployment, low income, social exclusion, and poverty (Markussen, 2016). In addition, they often have a long and difficult school career behind them, and a lack of social recourses and networks leaves them with social and mental health problems (Schmid, 2020). Statistics from Norway indicate that the risk of ESL is far greater in VET than in general education (SSB, 2021).

The additional school year is a program for students at risk of ESL (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2021). The purpose is to offer youths the opportunity to prepare for upper secondary school, both academically and personally (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2021). The target group are youths who, for various reasons, could benefit from supplementary lower secondary schooling. The additional school year is meant to provide these students with a flexible and individually adapted learning and practice environment located within existing upper secondary schools, aiming at upper secondary school completion at a later stage. Mawn et al. (2017) found that high-intensity multi-component interventions, featuring classroom and job-based training, increased employment amongst young people aged 16–24 years who were not in employment, education, or training (NEET). Providing students at risk of ESL with an additional school year could illustrate such an intervention, as well as an example of an alternative schooling arena. The key difference between mainstream or conventional lower secondary school and the additional school year,

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is the opportunity to offer fewer subjects, job training and more freedom in terms of how to organize training adapted to the individual needs of the students (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2021).

In the context of the present paper, inclusion entails providing students at risk of ESL with an arena for alternative education that is adapted to their individual needs; both socially and academically. Thus, we argue that the aim of the additional school year is that of inclusion; preparing youths for continued presence, participation, and achievement (Ainscow et al., 2006) in school and/or training. However, as we later discuss, suggesting that some students may need additional preparation in an alternative setting presents a dilemma within inclusion research that is evident in the current research as well.

Since an additional school year is relatively new in a Norwegian context, no studies, to our knowledge, have described how students experience this additional school year. Furthermore, there is a lack of qualitative data and analysis on ESL preventive efforts (De Witte et al., 2013). Considering the potential value of a supplemental school year as an ESL intervention, exploring the students' experiences after attending such a program is pertinent. Within the theoretical framework of re-engagement and disengagement that we later discuss, we explore the following research question:

How do students describe their preparedness for education and training after attending an additional school year?

Early School Leaving and School Interventions

There are several risk factors associated with ESL, such as poor academic achievement, weak ties to peers, mental health problems, and poor connection to the school system as a whole (Markussen, 2016). Tinto (1994) argues that it is first and foremost the students' social and academic experience in school and their experience of being socially and academically integrated that is important for their motivation for staying in school. One can therefore view ESL as a process of engagement in school activities, where ESL becomes the final act of disengagement from school.

The process of disengagement from school can be slow and ambiguous, in which relationships with teachers and the school context deteriorate (Tvedt et al., 2021). Although ESL is best understood as the result of a gradual process, few studies explore the processes occurring in school or the quality of teaching in the classroom as factors that are likely to affect ESL (Magen-Nagar & Shachar, 2017, p. 9). The focus of most ESL interventions has, therefore, often been on improving student performance rather than institutional structures and practices (Lee & Burkam, 2003). Though several studies point to one of the most significant factors being previous poor academic achievement (Gubbels et al., 2019), there is insufficient research on

school characteristics in understanding and explaining ESL, and how one can adapt the system to meet students' needs. This is important to consider within ESL research, we suggest, as it challenges the individualistic notions of ESL, and can decrease a "blame the victim" mentality to ESL interventions (Nada et al., 2020).

Re-Engagement Through Alternative Schooling

As previously said, this study discusses preparedness through the lens of re-engagement. There are numerous definitions of school engagement and disengagement in educational literature (Fredricks et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2019). Wang and colleagues (2019) found that school engagement is a multi-dimensional construct, including behavioural, emotional, cognitive, and social components. Behavioural engagement refers to active participation in activities, both academic and non-academic, as well as conduct aligning with the expected conduct of the school context. Emotional engagement includes experiencing a positive affect toward school activities and recognizing their value. Lastly, cognitive engagement entails students using learning strategies and willingly putting their effort into school work to provide quality work and develop complex comprehension (Fredricks et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2019).

Others approach re-engagement as a process (see e.g., Velloso, 2009). Velloso (2009) defines re-engagement as co-constructed between adults and youths, given that the youths are provided learning contexts characterized by a genuine interest and respect, flexibility in time, space and tasks; as well as engaging in a curriculum that is meaningful to them (Velloso, 2009). A key finding in the study is the importance of recognizing engagement as socially constructed and that both youths and adults play important roles (Velloso, 2009).

Thus, re-engagement can happen in a spectrum of ways (Velloso & Vadeboncoeur, 2015), and includes more than being present at school, or observed engagement. Engagement is subjective and can have different meanings for various students from different contexts (Tarabini et al., 2019). As such, obtaining insights into students' experiences is the key to new knowledge.

Though alternative schools or programs do not necessarily equal student re-engagement with school, ample research indicates that they are "sites of re-engagement" (Velloso, 2009, p. 3), or sanctuaries (Vadeboncoeur et al., 2021); sites that allow flexibility in terms of time and space (Vadeboncoeur, 2005), and a place where youths experience belonging and participation (Jones, 2011). There is, however, a need for research into the effectiveness of alternative schooling interventions (Schwab et al., 2016). Additionally, some researchers argue that alternative education contributes to the reproduction of vulnerability (Dadvand, 2021). From the outset of the study, the possible deleterious effect of suggesting that some students may need additional preparation is a dilemma that engaged the research team. We were, however,

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interested in bringing forward students' voices of how they experienced the additional school year in terms of preparedness for future schooling and training while acknowledging the contradictions inherent in alternative education, and the potential inequities in the structure of education that necessitates alternative programs, to begin with (Vadeboncoeur, 2009).

Consequently, we argue that describing youths' experiences of preparedness after attending the additional school year is important to better understand the potential of the additional school year on continued presence, participation, and engagement in future schooling. Though the different components presented by e.g., Fredericks et al. (2004) and Wang et al. (2019) can help us understand students' different ways of engaging in school, we take on a perspective of re-engagement as a process, as usefully crafted by Velloso (2009) in her study on youths' re-engagement in alternative schooling. As most definitions of ESL fail to account for the gradual process of disengagement that happens when youths leave school early (González-Rodríguez et al., 2019; Magen-Nagar & Shachar, 2017), we find it pertinent to see re-engagement as a non-static, evolving and dialectical concept. In a similar vein to Velloso, we define re-engagement as a process, that includes youths re-connecting with systems to complete upper secondary school. Although alternative schools and programmes can vary greatly in numerous ways; approaches, lengths, and purposes (Velloso & Vadeboncoeur, 2013), the present paper focuses on additional school year provisions described in the introduction.

Methods

In the following section, we describe the sample, method of data collection, analysis, and ethical considerations. The participants in this study were all students attending the additional school year. As the aim of the study was to gain insight into the student's own experiences, they were provided with the opportunity to express themselves through semi-structured interviews.

Sample and Sample Characteristics

A purposive sample (Patton, 2002) of 17 youths, age 16 (n= 17), from a large city in Norway were selected to describe their experiences from attending the additional school year. The main selection criteria for participant selection were students motivated for school attendance and attending the additional school year.

Most of the participants were recruited to the additional school year directly from lower secondary schools. A few participants had started but quit, in the first year of upper secondary school. The participants were dominantly males (n = 11). All participants in this study aspired to VET but were somewhat uncertain about what to choose in upper secondary school. The students' descriptions of their backgrounds were heterogenous, for example, troubled home

situations and mental health challenges. A common description across most participants was, however, a previous lack of academic achievement and/or high levels of school absenteeism in lower secondary schools. As such, the participants fit within the target group of the additional school year, as the students needed to have a genuine interest and motivation for change.

Data

During the spring of 2019 and 2020, the 17 participants all took part in semi-structured individual interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015) with the first author at the end of their additional school year attendance. Eight of the participants were interviewed twice, one year after the first interview (Table 1). The main purpose of the interviews was to obtain insights into students' experiences of the additional school year, what led them to the program, and how it potentially prepared them for future schooling and training. Additionally, they were asked to describe previous school experiences and their recruitment process for the additional school year. The first interviews took place at the school in which they attended the additional school year, while the second interviews were completed by phone due to Covid restrictions. The interviews ranged from six minutes to 64 minutes in length. Combined, they resulted in 305 minutes of audio-recorded material. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first author. Parts of the transcripts were then translated into English for this paper. To ensure the confidentiality of the participants, quotes are presented by referring to participants with numbers. This also excludes gender and other descriptions of the participants.

Analysis

We approached the material using reflexive thematic analysis (TA) (Braun, Clarke, & Hayfield, 2019), as it allows for a flexible theoretically abductive approach to the material (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, et al., 2019). In the following, we describe and exemplify our analytical and reflexive process resulting in one main theme, three sub-themes and a summary theme relating to our research question.

To sustain sensitivity to the data, we were inspired by the six steps in thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019): (i) familiarization with the data; (ii) generation of initial codes; (iii) constructing themes; (iv) reviewing the themes; (v) defining and naming the themes; and (vi) producing the report. The first two steps involved transcribing the audio-recorded interviews and examining each text as a whole to get a sense of students' descriptions of their experiences of preparedness for future education and training, making casual notes along the way, and sharing perspectives on the data, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Example of Phase (i) and (ii)

Direct citation from the data	Casual notes example	Initial code
Interviewer: "Earlier you said that it was kind of difficult to go to lower secondary school when you had been absent because then you did not know what had been going on and stuff. What was it that suddenly made it easier?"	Perhaps related to the meaningfulness of engaging in the practical activity?	Practical and future preparedness in obtaining work.
Student: "(...) Because I started and then I got the work training. (...) Now it feels easier to get started and go to school more. As with the three days, I went to school last week, and the last two days of the week worked. Because when I came to work those two days. They will help me too. If I do that [work/practical training] too".	Important for future training and work. How practical training and work are intertwined and render positive and dialectical effects.	

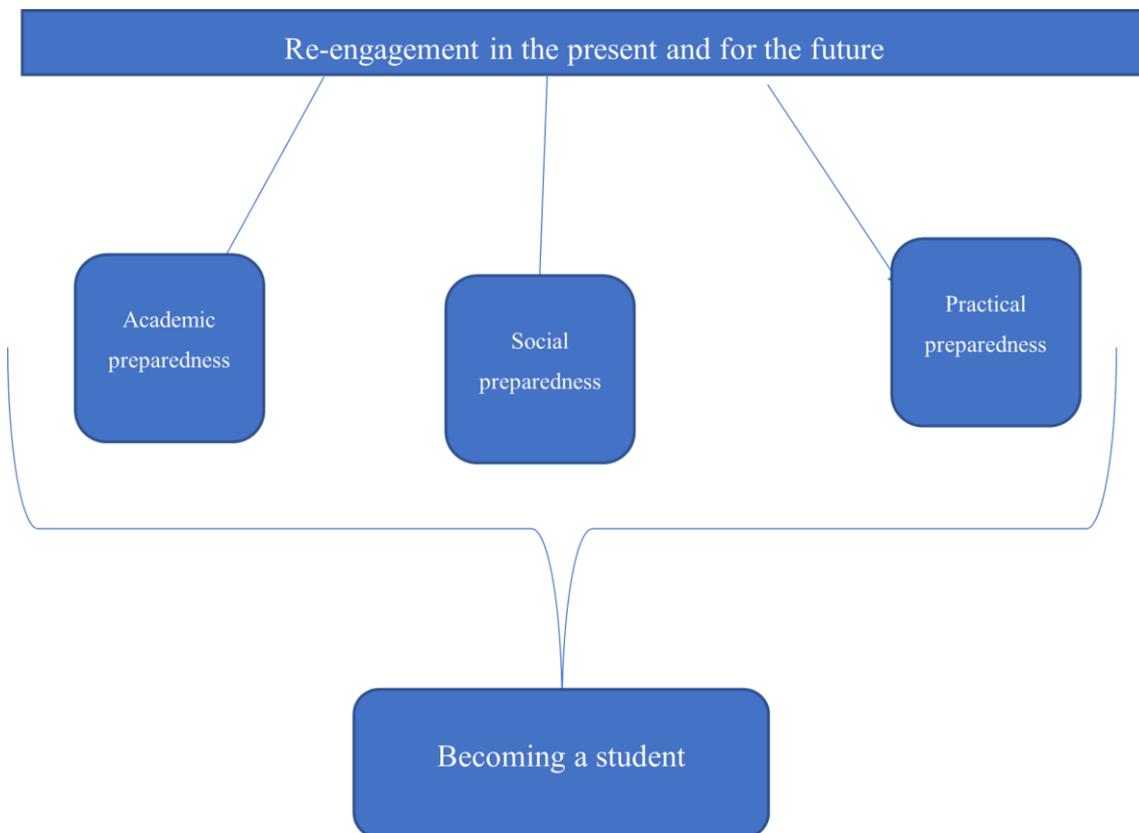
These phases also entailed a more detailed and systematic engagement with data through generating codes, helping us organise and unite data from various participants. Multiple readings of the interview transcripts, both individually and together, resulted in over 100 generated codes, thus only a few examples are included: 'ability to make a plan', 'less stressful environment', 'reduced absenteeism', and 'variation'. During these two initial phases of coding, we were alerted to the theoretical concept of engagement, and in particular re-engagement (see e.g., Velloso, 2009). As Braun, Clarke and Hayfield (2019) claim, the story of the data is always anchored within other stories and theories. Our previous experiences in the school system with youths and our interest in how and why youths return or stay despite negative school experiences, as well as our close readings of the data, led us to the literature on re-engagement. Further analysis and theme construction were impacted by exploring and

engaging in this literature, and the theoretical underpinnings of re-engagement enabled us to explore patterns of data in relation to the research question.

The next two phases (iii and iv) included constructing and reviewing themes that could contribute to telling the story of the data material. Braun and Clarke (2019) define themes as “patterns of shared meaning underpinned by a central organizing concept” (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 593) that can be both “beneath the surface” and explicit and concrete (Braun et al., 2019, p. 845). In this paper, both ‘types’ of themes are evident. These two phases included several concurrent processes: For one, we used the developed codes as theme building blocks. For example, the codes ‘reduced absenteeism’, ‘improved academic results’, and ‘learning what to expect from school’ resulted in the development of the candidate theme: ‘Academic participation’, that over time was re-named ‘Academic preparedness’ in the phase of naming and defining themes (v). Secondly, these two phases were characterized by a process of back and forth between the two authors, using thematic mapping (Braun et al., 2019) to visualize our ideas. This resulted in a map of ten themes, including e.g., ‘Hopes and dreams’, ‘Learning what to expect from school’, ‘Extra-curricular activities’, ‘Self-concept’; to the ones we have presented below, e.g., ‘Academic preparedness’.

Thirdly, through our reflexive engagement with the data, we came to realize that the main theme could be seeing preparedness as ‘A process of re-engagement in the now and for the future’, followed by three sub-themes. As such, in phase (v) we named and defined the themes that best told the story of the data. Perhaps this was due to our descriptive research question. We also developed a summary theme; Becoming a student. Consequently, the result of this iterative and reflexive approach was one main theme and three sub-themes, and what we call a summary theme, as displayed in Figure 1:

Figure 1. Summary of the themes



Ethical Considerations

The study was reported to and approved by the Norwegian centre for research data. All participants were provided with informed and written consent forms. As the additional school year is a relatively new offer, and therefore few students have so far participated, we do not describe the participants or the school in-depth to ensure their confidentiality.

Findings

In this section, we report the findings from the analysis related to the research question; How do the students describe their preparedness for education and training after attending an additional school year? This section is organized according to the main theme and sub-themes. Verbatim quotes from the data serve as both illustrations of words communicated by the participants, as well a means for serving the readers' assessments of the accuracy of the analysis (Eldh et al., 2020). However, first, we provide a brief description of the additional school year, as the flexible organizational and relational characteristics of the additional school year could be a prerequisite for some of the experiences voiced in the next sub-sections.

The additional school year is organized as a class in an existing upper secondary school, where

students are provided with curricula of both lower and upper secondary school subjects, as well as opportunities for practical job training. Students are mainly recruited directly from lower secondary schools, and all students attending the additional school year are from various schools in the intake area. The additional program consists of the following team; a counsellor, a social worker and two teachers from lower secondary school. As we described in the introduction, the additional school year is meant to be flexible, individualized, and focused on both academic and social learning (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2021). The students' descriptions are closely related to the described purpose, indicating close follow-up from the teachers, close relations between the students and the staff and teachers' hands-on approach. As one student voiced; "Here we receive assistance with everything we do" (Student 2).

The students also seemed to describe flexible solutions and individualized support beyond the academic sphere; "We receive more adaptations. We get what we need" (Student 9). As one student indicated; "The easiest way to describe it [the additional school year] is simply to say that it is a lot more directed towards the individual student compared to lower secondary school" (Student 14).

The structures of the classroom, and reduced class size, in particular, seemed to enable both academic and social adaptations; "We are very few in the classroom (...). We all understand. We take it slow" (Student 1), as well as individually adapted tasks; "Many (students) receive various tasks according to how difficult the tasks are" (Student 7).

Preparedness: A Process of Re-Engagement in the Present and for the Future

Students described what we termed 'a process of re-engagement', and ways in which the additional school year prepared them both for the present and the future. The students pointed to numerous ways of experiencing being more prepared; socially, academically, practically, and, in summary, the process of becoming a student.

Social Preparedness

Several students described their previous school experiences as 'rugged'. They often teamed up with other students to wander the halls or distracted the general learning environment. The students now voiced how teachers helped them focus and strive for learning and academic progress. Learning from one's previous mistakes was part of preparing for future education and training, as one student sums up; "Well, I have grown up, sort of. I have done a lot of stupid things this [additional] year, but I have learnt from my mistakes" (Student 1).

They also pointed to their new classmates as equal learning partners accepted by their new

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classmates; “We got the same problems. We all have bad grades, so you don’t feel different. We are together in this, and I got friends here. With like everyone” (Student 5). Later the student explained how this affected his performance and well-being; “Friends are pretty important (...) We help each other, we collaborate”.

Peer support was important for students although they didn’t socialize outside of school. Several students experienced becoming better communicators both in school and the workplace. A student put it this way;

...so it works for me both in practice and being in school because I have in a way learned to collaborate with others, and help them get better and change and stuff... Yes, we build a lot of communication, everything, so I feel that I have improved (Student 9).

One year later the student reflects; “I felt that I had improved myself, both academically and related to my social skills. Like, how and what you communicate with others”. Looking back, the student voiced that it was imperative to mature before attending upper secondary school.

However, preparedness and re-engagement in the present were also intertwined with academic preparedness, as one student seemed to voice;

Like academically, the students became quite a bit like, you were pushed to hold a presentation in front of all of them [the other students]. We did trials in front of the teachers, and they kind of pushed us to become better. Also, socially we somehow grew more confident in each other, we became more confident in ourselves, so it made that somehow ... I almost became proud of myself if I may say so ... (Student 6).

Thus, both teachers and peers were important for academic and social maturation, through a combination of being safe and being pushed.

Academic Preparedness

The students spoke of learning in two ways; in terms of the subjects, and as a concept. Student 2’s description was typical; “Of the things I’ve learned, I feel that I learn more here. I don’t necessarily feel that I’m more proficient in the subjects”. On a follow-up question the student elaborates; “We’ve focused on some topics in each subject, so I improved in those topics. We learnt about them in a good way. But I don’t think I have gotten better in the subjects”. This also exemplifies that the teachers can focus on specific themes in each subject where students need to improve. It also illustrates one of the main themes in the student interviews; they get a sense of how they can learn and what it takes to learn.

Student 15 highlighted subject learning as the reason he experienced being better prepared for upper secondary school; “I’ve learned more”. Another student (6) pointed towards

participation and self-confidence as to why he experienced being more prepared for upper secondary school; “I have begun to dare to talk to the teachers. Raise my hand, say something in class”. The biggest difference for this student, like several of his peers, was that he was engaging in class and his learning. Several students also talked about the teachers’ role in this process; “It’s the teachers. They help you a lot. Also, they try to help me navigate for the future” (Student 5). This student also tells an important story about taking responsibility for the future; “One has to work to improve your grades. You can’t just sit there and listen. Now I focus on when the teachers talk. Then I can go home after school and work on what they told us. That’s the reason I have bettered my grades. I work hard now”.

Practical Preparedness

Another important factor in the re-engagement process was practical schooling. Students were encouraged to work as part of their training. One student (7) went from being absent throughout lower secondary school, to attending most days. When asked why, the response was brief; “Training [job-training]”. Some worked one day a week, others more; “I just can’t stand going to school. That’s the reason I work now” (Student 3). For others the paycheck was an incentive to work, however, work also had a deeper meaning;

When you work, you get paid. But like, if you don’t show up you missed something. Then you don’t experience what you could have experienced. If you show up you would have been done at the end of the day, and you would get paid. If you hadn’t attended, you would have just stayed home. And you would have missed out on something (Student 7).

Keeping in mind this student had extensive school absenteeism in lower secondary school.

Becoming a Student

The process of re-engagement is perhaps best summarized in our summary theme; becoming a student. Becoming a student is not just being a student present at school or practice, but becoming an engaged student who actively makes conscious decisions to produce a particular result.

As the previous descriptions indicate, students developed as learners. Some students changed from having what they referred to as ‘no idea’ about their future to “getting time to figure out what I want” (Student 9). As one student voiced; “I’d rather do an extra year so I figure out what I want to do, to improve my grades and get into the school that I want. It can make the difference between getting a job that I want or not” (Student 7).

Becoming a student could involve crafting a plan: “I have built a plan as to how I am going to do it [become a nurse]” (Student 9). Thus, long-term planning featured in the discussions of how they became active in planning and preparing for further education and training. When

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asked about when (s)he decided on a long-term plan, the response indicated that the alternative school year provided the student with an opportunity to change and mould plans for the future; “I have talked to the teachers about what I want and I decided that I want to work with children [rather than in construction work]” (Student 16). The teachers helped the student make a plan accordingly, planning out the various educational paths.

There was, however, room for improvement, and not everyone felt as prepared and confident as indicated by one student; “They [the teachers] talked a lot about it [career choices] during the additional school year; That they wanted to prepare us to make the best choices, but I do not think they have done a very good job. Like they had one or two lessons where the teacher showed us some web pages (...). Maybe they should have asked questions about what we like to do” (Student 11).

Becoming a student also seemed to be characterized by a process of maturation, or as one student put it; “Now, I am more grown up, right?” (Student 13), and “I was a bit childish (...). Running around. Throwing things” (Student 11). This process of maturation prepared them both in terms of “focusing on myself” (Student 9), and “feeling more mature” (Student 11), even though several of the youths described worrying about missing out when their friends moved on to upper secondary school. In the follow-up interview one year after completing the additional school year, a student described the maturation as a process; “I do not regret the additional school year. Well, I did at first, but I did not understand how much I gained from it. However, when I started [upper secondary] school I understood how much that year gave me. And one year; It was worth it” (Student 9).

Discussion

In the following, we discuss the research question as to how youths describe their preparedness after attending an additional school year.

Preparedness as Many-Faceted

For one, our analysis indicates that youths’ experiences are many-faceted and intertwined, where social, academic and practical preparedness all relate but are also distinct. The youths described a process of re-engagement summarized as becoming a student, or as Vadeboncoeur and Padilla-Petry (2017) describe it; “come to see themselves as learners” (p. 3). Recognizing the many ways youths describe becoming prepared for future schooling and practice can be useful for several reasons. First by seeing ways of becoming prepared as a process of re-engagement one can inform schools about what youths see as key areas to themselves when deciding to stay in school. Second, and as previous literature on engagement points out (Fredricks et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2019), engagement can take many forms, as

supported by our study. Here, the students described the process of becoming increasingly active, developing greater positive feelings toward themselves, and making an effort to do schoolwork. Lastly, the process of maturation should not be understated. Thus, the many-facetedness of experiencing preparedness could very well be intertwined with becoming older and having more experiences, but doing so within safe, flexible, and adapted school environments.

Preparedness as Intertwined with the Structures of Schooling

The aforementioned descriptions of being prepared cannot be discussed separately from the context they were described in; namely the additional school year context. The students provided several indications that their descriptions were closely related to the flexible and adapted education provided during the additional school year. Several researchers indicate similar findings (Vadeboncoeur, 2005; Vadeboncoeur & Padilla-Petry, 2017). Thus, although this is not necessarily a surprising finding, we do believe this finding provides an important message in terms of inclusion (Ainscow et al., 2006). First, considering ESL as a gradual process (Tvedt et al., 2021; Tinto, 1994) has implications for interventions, as it demands recognition of how one can intervene before the final act of disengagement occurs. Structures that enable presence, participation, and engagement (Ainscow et al., 2006) seem essential in the present study when combining students' descriptions of the additional school year structures, teachers, class size, and flexibility. One is to provide youths with sites for re-engagement in schooling (Vellos, 2009), characterized by flexibility in time and space (Vadeboncoeur, 2005) and connectedness between teachers and students (Tinto, 1994). The quality of teaching is often under-communicated in ESL research (Magen-Nagar & Shachar, 2017). This study may be a small contribution towards understanding how an additional school year is experienced by students themselves, both in the present and for the future, in close interaction with the affordances of the school, as well as maturation.

Preparedness as a Process of Re-Engagement

Finally, our analysis resulted in our main theme as viewing preparedness as a process of re-engagement, in the present and for the future. The students felt so estranged from lower secondary school that school-related activities did not resonate with them. As Tinto (1994) argues, ESL is first and foremost a matter of students' experiences of being integrated with various aspects of school life. When students feel estranged, they experience a lack of meaning and lose direction.

Furthermore, Lillejord and colleagues (2015) underline the importance of having a future perspective, or as Vadeboncoeur et al. (2021) describe it; imagining futures. Estranged students often don't fully understand the relevance of what they are doing in school or see how it can be useful for the future. For students who for briefer or longer periods experience a

loss of meaning, a future perspective can serve as a support to persevere. It is necessary to support students in finding meaning and working towards a goal. When they felt that the teachers were there for them and that the system supported them, they thrived and felt motivated to change. As stated by Vadeboncoeur et al., (2021) and Velloso (2009), alternative schools or programs do not necessarily equal student re-engagement, but are potential sanctuaries where students are allowed to experience belonging and participation (Jones, 2011).

Limitations

The limited number of participants eliminates the opportunity to generalize to the population of students attending alternative school settings. We do, however, hope that the findings are recognizable to the target group and that the experiences of youths provide a foundation for further research into the additional school year and its potential for preparing youths for upper secondary school. A second limitation is the exclusion of students who were not present at the time of the interviews. These students could provide nuances to the present sample. Thirdly, few students (n=8) participated in the follow-up interviews. Although everyone was invited for a second interview, the first author was not able to reach everyone. Less is therefore known about their experiences one year later. Fourthly, the interviews varied in duration. All students were asked the same questions and opportunity to speak freely. However, the interviews concerned a sensitive subject and some students struggled to elaborate.

Summary, Implications and Future Research

Students indicated numerous ways of experiencing preparedness; socially, academically and practically. Our analysis indicated that preparedness was characterized by a process of re-engagement, both while attending the school year, and in terms of future schooling and training. We discussed three key aspects of our findings; preparedness as many-faceted; preparedness as intertwined with the structures provided in alternative schooling; and preparedness as a process of re-engagement.

There are implications to consider for both alternative schooling arenas and conventional schools. First, we need to recognize student voices when researching the additional school year as an ESL intervention. Taking students' perspectives is in itself valuable in ESL research due to the lack of qualitative data and analysis (DeWitte et al., 2013), but also because engagement is subjective (Tarabini et al., 2019).

Second, we must recognize the value of flexible and adapted education that accounts for the needs of the individual. The features characterizing the additional school years may help

challenge the structures of conventional schooling, and function as a reminder as to why ESL interventions in alternative schooling may be necessary (Vadeboncoeur & Padilla-Petry, 2017). In order to limit ESL and provide students with the opportunity to learn valuable skills for themselves and for the community, the educational systems need to find ways to adapt to the needs of at-risk youths. As Vadeboncoeur and colleagues (2021) say; “programs become sanctuaries and for whom should inspire us to consider ways to intentionally design for these possibilities, while at the same time inquiring deeply into how school systems themselves may be transformed” (p. 11). One could argue that the model for the additional school year could have transfer value in an international context as it provides at-risk youths with an opportunity to re-engage in their education and future.

There is a need for continued research into what mainstream schools may learn from alternative education in fighting ESL (Nada et al., 2020). In terms of expanding research into an additional school year, the voices of staff and parents could be useful to depict. Furthermore, longitudinal studies are useful to recognize longer-term consequences in terms of preparedness in the longer run. International comparative studies could also be of interest.

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