

“School comes first. Always.”

*A Qualitative Study Exploring the Role of
Gender and Educational Program in the
Experience of School Stress Among
Norwegian Adolescents*

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Abstract

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Despite concerns regarding the increase in stress-related health complaints among Norwegian adolescents, especially girls, the reason behind these worrisome statistics is less understood. Scholars point to the school as a great source of stress for adolescents, but studies to date have been mainly quantitative and conducted in other countries, with minimal attention to the influence of educational program. We aimed to address these gaps in the literature by exploring the significance of gender and educational program in the experience of school-related stress among pupils from the eastern part of southern Norway. This was achieved through individual semi-structured interviews with 20 pupils in their final year of upper secondary school, from both general studies and vocational education programs. The empirical material was analysed by means of thematic analysis, within a contextualist framework underpinned by critical realist ontology. The aim was to investigate what is perceived as stressful at school, for whom, and to what extent, and the analytical endeavour was summarized by four main themes: “day-to-day stressors at school”, “securing future prospects”, “the only acceptable alternative is being the best”, and “coping with imposing demands”. The pupils’ accounts demonstrated how perceived expectations and academic demands influenced the stress experience, and receiving the desired grades was the most significant concern, due to its vitality for present and future success. Performance-related pressure was especially straining for the high-achieving girls in general studies, due to self-worth investments in obtaining high grades, and the role-identification as a high-performer. In providing adolescents with the optimal preconditions for future life, we argue that the school has great potential in ameliorating pupils’ stress levels through increased pupil participation, autonomy-support, and a learning-oriented goal structure.

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1. Introduction

Background

The influence of stress on adolescents' health and wellbeing is widely documented, with adolescent girls identified as a particularly vulnerable group (Byrne, Davenport, & Mazanov, 2007; Sletten & Bakken, 2016). High levels of stress in adolescence are not surprising due to the rapid change and increased responsibility during this life-stage (Byrne et al., 2007; Östberg et al., 2015). What warrants concern is that the proportion of Norwegian adolescents reporting psychosomatic pain and mental health problems has increased in the last decade, and data from the 2017 National Youth Survey demonstrate that almost 50% of upper secondary pupils report high levels of typical stress symptoms (Bakken, 2017, p. 78). These symptoms increase in accordance with grade level, reaching a peak in the final year of upper secondary school. Only a few studies have tried to explain what causes this development (Sletten & Bakken, 2016), but research examining reported stressors in different domains of adolescents' life indicate that school is a pronounced stressor (Byrne et al., 2007; Eriksen, Sletten, Bakken, & von Soest, 2017, p. 7; Landstedt & Gådin, 2012; Sweeting, West, Young, & Der, 2010). In Norway, 6 out of 10 girls, and 3 out of 10 boys, in upper secondary school report that they often feel stressed about their schoolwork (Bakken, 2017, p. 4).

School and education appear to play a more prominent role in adolescents' life, compared to earlier (Sletten & Bakken, 2016, p. 62). This is mirrored in the high reports of stress emanating from performance-related pressure and internal demands to excel at school (Landstedt & Gådin, 2012; Östberg et al., 2015), especially among girls (Klinger et al., 2015; Murberg & Bru, 2004), and academic program pupils (Landstedt & Gådin, 2012). Worries over school achievements and pressure to obtain high marks are associated with psychosomatic symptoms among Norwegian adolescents (Murberg & Bru, 2004). This makes it essential to explore why adolescents, mainly girls and academic program pupils, seem to impose such high demands on themselves, and why these demands are perceived as stressful.

Although there are few research based answers to why adolescents impose such high demands on themselves, some scholars have suggested that the increasing individualization and the growth of knowledge societies are partly responsible (Låftman, Almquist, & Östberg, 2013; Wiklund, Bengs, Malmgren-Olsson, & Öhman, 2010; Östberg et al., 2015). With greater freedom, independent choices and opportunities follows more responsibility on young people to be self-disciplined and self-inventive in order to be successful. Moreover, a more

competitive school-environment is emerging, reflected in stricter admission requirements and more attention surrounding achievement measures in school (Klinger et al., 2015; Sweeting et al., 2010). Higher education has also gained importance as a necessary entrance ticket to the labor market (Sletten & Bakken, 2016, p. 62), and in the National Youth Survey, 68% of the adolescents report intentions of pursuing a higher education (Bakken, 2017, p. 40).

There is need for more in-depth knowledge of the reasons behind the prevalent gender gap in internalizing mental health problems among Norwegian adolescents (Eriksen et al., 2017, p. 11), and this study aims to contribute to fill this gap by exploring which stressors that are prevalent at school, from individual accounts of Norwegian pupils. Studies to date have been mostly quantitative (Låftman et al., 2013), with younger adolescents from lower secondary schools (Eriksen et al., 2017; Låftman & Modin, 2012; Murberg & Bru, 2004), paying little attention to the influence of educational program (Landstedt & Gådin, 2012). Most qualitative studies have been carried out in other European countries (e.g., Banks & Smyth, 2015; Låftman et al., 2013), and the only Norwegian study utilized focus group interviews (Eriksen et al., 2017). By employing individual interviews we are able to explore lived experiences and participant defined meanings, without the influence of group-dynamics (Willig, 2015).

By means of in-depth individual qualitative interviews among Norwegian pupils in their final year of upper secondary school, this study aims to explore the significance of gender and educational program in the experience of school-related stress. More specifically, we want to address what is stressful at school, for whom, and to what extent. Before addressing these questions, the following section outlines the structure of the Norwegian educational system as a context for analysis.

The Norwegian Educational Structure

Norway has a 10-year compulsory school that is free of charge, starting at the age of 6 and finishing at the age of 16 (Thune, Reiegg, & Askheim, 2015). Attendance to upper secondary school is a legally established right (Opplæringslova, 1998, §3-1), and although it is optional, the majority of pupils apply after their final year of mandatory schooling (SSB, 2018). The upper secondary schools offer 12 different educational programs that pupils can choose from (Thune et al., 2015). The program for general studies merely consists of school based teaching for three years, while the vocational programs usually involve two years of school-provided teaching, and two years of specialization while working for a company,

although different options do exist (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017a). Pupils finishing a vocational education program and completing apprenticeship training are provided with a craft certificate and a professional title, while pupils finishing the program for general studies are given a general university and college admission certificate (Thune et al., 2015).

Norwegian pupils receive formal grades from the age of 14, i.e. the 8th grade. The assessment system consists of a six-point scale ranging from 1 to 6, with 6 being the highest (Nilssen, 2016). Admission to upper secondary school is dependent on the final marks from 10th grade, while the grade point average (GPA) from the last year of upper secondary school is decisive for university intake. Overall, the educational level in Norway is high; 92,3% of all adolescents in the age range between 16 and 18 attends upper secondary school (SSB, 2018), and 35,1% of young adults between 19 to 24 years of age attend higher education (SSB, 2017). Norway is also one of the countries in the world where the majority of the population achieve a higher education at some point during their life (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). This is important in this context, as culture and educational systems will vary across nations (Klinger et al., 2015), and previous research may not be attributable to the Norwegian setting.

Theoretical Perspectives: Stress, Coping, and Motivation

Conceptualizing stress. Depending on the research agenda, stress is conceptualized in different ways, but common to all definitions is that stress signifies an imbalance grounded in an individual's need to adapt to environmental changes and demands (Schraml, 2013). In defining psychological stress, the transactional model is dominating, viewing stress as rising from person-environment transactions (Aldwin, 2012). According to this model, stress denotes the relationship between the person and environmental demands, and is neither adaptive nor maladaptive in its nature, but dependent on a person's cognitive appraisal and coping processes (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19). Negative psychological stress is endured when experienced demands are appraised as taxing or exceeding an individual's coping resources, creating an imbalance between experienced demands and an individual's possibility to deal with these demands. Consequently, there is no objective way to predict psychological stress as a reaction without reference to the properties of the person, as individuals in comparable conditions can react differently (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 21).

As such, quantitative research is inadequate when the aim is to understand why an individual interprets an event as distressing (Willig, 2015, p. 52).

Cognitive appraisal is an evaluative process, not always conscious, that determines why and to what extent a particular transaction between the person and the environment is perceived as stressful (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 21). In order for stress to be evoked for a person, two cognitive events must occur. Firstly, the person must evaluate the potential risk, and deem the event as a threat to his or her personal goals and wellbeing. This process is termed primary appraisal. Facing a stressor, the second appraisal follows; involving a judgment about how to deal with the situation, and assessing own coping resources and available options. Stress is endured if the person concludes that the available resources are insufficient in dealing with the demands of the threatening event (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 53). The last phase involves the actual response or coping strategy employed in order to manage the stressful event. This process is not necessarily linear, but part of a continuous cognitive evaluation.

Coping with stress. While stress is an inevitable aspect of human life, it is coping that influences the adaptation outcome (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 6). Coping involves constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts in order to manage a perceived stressful event. A common distinction of coping strategies is to differentiate between problem-oriented and emotion-focused coping. The former involves efforts to manage or alter the problem causing stress, and is most probable when the distressing event is appraised as amenable to change (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 150). Problem-focused efforts can involve active attempts, such as effort exertion, strategizing, and planning (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2012). It also entails strategies directed inward at the self, including motivational or cognitive changes, such as shifting level of aspiration or finding alternative channels of gratification (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 152). Emotion-oriented coping involves regulating the emotional response to the problematic event, and is usually employed when one appraises the situation as unchangeable. The latter includes strategies such as avoidance, minimization, selective attention, and positive comparisons (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 150). Strategies such as problem-solving, help-seeking, and distraction is viewed as more constructive responses, in contrast to more maladaptive strategies such as helplessness, escape, and rumination (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2012).

An individual's coping system includes many interacting components influencing the outcome of the coping process (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck,

2012). These components include the nature of the stressor itself, and its severity and controllability, the surrounding context, the evaluation of what is at stake, the personal and social resources available to the individual when managing the event, and previous encounters with both novel and recurrent stressors. Some of these components will be discussed subsequently, related to the adolescent period.

Adolescence is a potentially troubled, transitional period, marked by rapid physical and psychosocial changes, and increasing responsibility (Gelhaar et al., 2007). A prosperous transition from adolescence to adulthood is likely to be enhanced by competence in dealing with stress (Eppelman et al., 2016). Research on coping and stress in adolescence, have primarily concerned the impact of major life events and extreme stressors, while less is known about the normative stressors and accumulated daily hassles, such as academic pressure and school-related stress (Gelhaar et al., 2007; Suldo, Shaunessy, & Hardesty, 2008). Even though daily hassles are far less dramatic than major life changes, they may be even more important in adaptation and health (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 12).

In assessing everyday hassles among adolescents, coping strategies have been classified according to three domains, namely active coping (active problem-solving and support-seeking), internal coping (cognitively reflecting about possible solutions), and withdrawal (avoiding the problem) (Seiffge-Krenke, 1995, p. 124). Drawing on 58 studies, Zimmer-Gembeck and Skinner (2011) found that problem-solving, distraction, support-seeking, and escape, were the coping strategies most often utilized by adolescents. The employed coping behavior is also dependent on the type of normative stressor, with active coping being more common in dealing with peer-related stressors, while more emotion-oriented and dysfunctional coping strategies is used when dealing with school- or parent-related problems (Seiffge-Krenke, 1995, p. 121). In dealing with future-related problems, most adolescents employed cognitive-reflective coping strategies. During adolescence, coping is increasingly more self-reliant with cognitive strategies becoming more powerful in guiding actions and regulating emotions. However, reliance on more emotion-oriented strategies can also lead to more rumination, and potentially more maladaptive stress reactions (Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2011). The advances in thinking and use of meta-cognitive strategies during adolescence also permit the skill of imagining long-term consequences and worrying about the future.

The influence of control. In supporting constructive mastery-oriented coping, personal resources such as level of perceived control, play a significant role (Skinner &

Zimmer-Gembeck, 2012). Perceived control is contingent on an overall sense of control and expectancies of success, beliefs about available possibilities, and one's access to efficient means. Individuals with high levels of confidence and self-efficacy in own abilities tend to appraise negative events as challenges, as opposed to threats, and remain focused on problem solving. In contrast, people who feel incompetent or judge events as contingent on uncontrollable causes, tend to give up more quickly and ruminate about failure. However, it is important to assess the actual objective controllability of outcomes (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2012). In relation to school, demands and challenges that can be influenced by the pupils' effort may invite to more functional and active coping strategies, such as deploying more time to schoolwork and seeking academic help (Eriksen et al., 2017, p. 24). When pupils experience little control over the school demands, and do not believe in their own abilities, internal and withdrawal coping is more likely, such as devaluing the significance of school.

The individual and society. Stress and coping must also be viewed in the context of the individual's relationship to society, and the social resources around the adolescent (Eriksen et al., 2017, p. 30; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 259). Depending on how social roles are valued, stress can occur if there is a mismatch between the individual and social identities, or when normative expectations connected to these roles create conflict (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 259). Categories like gender and social class can influence the challenges a person is exposed to, and stress from demands and expectations cannot be understood independent of context and the social roles a person holds (Eriksen et al., 2017, p. 29). Meeting the same objective school demands, boys and girls may have different vulnerability in dealing with these demands. The social environment also creates social relationships that can pose demands on the individual, but moreover it can be a place of support and buffer against stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 259). The assumption is that people will have better adaptation outcomes if they receive, or believe they will receive, support when in need, but this is a resource a person must cultivate and utilize to be useful in coping, and evaluate as supportive (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 259).

Motivation and autonomy. All individuals will meet external demands posed by society, not motivated by absolute needs or personal joy, but how they prioritize or distance themselves from these imposing demands can make a difference in their stress reaction (Eriksen et al., 2017, p. 24). Motivation can influence how an individual respond to these demands, and in the context of stress and coping, the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a useful explanatory framework (Deci & Ryan, 1985). SDT is a broad motivational theory of

personality that describes the influence of different types of motivation on individuals' perception of stressors, and their reaction to them (Weinstein & Ryan, 2011). It presents a continuum of motivation, but in the school context the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is most important. Whereas intrinsic motivation entails pursuing a goal by complete self-determination due to personal interest and feelings of autonomy, extrinsic motivation is dependent on external factors and pressure in order to achieve a goal (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Intrinsic motivation is considered optimal for health, wellbeing, and learning as it satisfies three basic human needs; the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Furthermore, it supports resilience and positive coping, and is protective against negative stress due to positive energy, volition, and interest (Ryan & Deci, 2008). Weinstein and Ryan (2011) describe how both individual and contextual factors can boost intrinsic motivation through need satisfaction. Individual differences, like being autonomously motivated, reduce the individual's interpretation of events as being stressful or threatening, and encourage the use of adaptive coping strategies. Social-contextual factors, such as autonomy-supportive environments, provide social support, positive and constructive feedback, and allow co-determination (Weinstein & Ryan, 2011). The risk of experiencing negative stress increases when extrinsic motivation dominates, and individuals with low autonomy orientation feel constantly under pressure, as they tend to perceive situations as threatening their self-esteem (Weinstein & Ryan, 2011). As many pupils struggle with constant assessments, and are only concerned about obtaining the right grades, school plays an important role in the pupils' health and coping, through the development of intrinsic motivation (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2013, p. 149).

State-of-the-Art

School induced stress. Research on school-related stress has demonstrated that pupils attribute stress to both short-term and long-term worries (Banks & Smyth, 2015; Eriksen et al., 2017). In the short-term, adolescents suffer from day-to-day stressors such as large amounts of schoolwork, fear of falling behind, time-pressure, and course deadlines (Banks & Smyth, 2015; Låftman et al., 2013; Murberg & Bru, 2004). The second form of stress is related to future plans, and is induced by exams and performance-pressure, as marks are important for future education and a prosperous career (Banks & Smyth, 2015; Eriksen et al., 2017, p. 95). Striving for a certain performance level is stressful for many pupils (Låftman et

al., 2013), and performance-related stressors such as marks, own demands, and future plans emerged as the most common determinants influencing pupils' stress levels at an upper secondary school in Sweden (Landstedt & Gådin, 2012). In examining academic stress, it is important to look at aspects of the schooling process, in addition to individual dispositions (Banks & Smyth, 2015; Låftman et al., 2013).

The school represents both a work environment and a social arena, imposing demands and challenges on the pupils in an effort to learn, but at the same time it can be a place of friendships and social support (Östberg et al., 2015). While school demands are negatively related to health and a source of stress for many pupils, teacher support, academic motivation and grades have a more positive influence on pupils' wellbeing (Låftman & Modin, 2012). School demands can be imposed on the pupils by teachers', peers', or parents' expectations, or shaped by the pupils' own ambition level, although no clear cut can be made as external demands can be internalized (Låftman et al., 2013). While teachers can drive up stress levels by emphasizing the importance of good exam results and its importance for future life chances, they can also reduce pupils' stress levels by engaging in encouraging teacher-pupil interactions and providing emotional support (Banks & Smyth, 2015). As with teachers, peers can be a great source of social support. Unfortunately, they also drive up stress levels by engaging in talk about the experienced stress and pressure at school (Banks & Smyth, 2015), or by comparing test results (Låftman et al., 2013). When examining variations in stress response to excessive demands, analysis are often focused on factors such as gender and self-esteem (Banks & Smyth, 2015).

Gender gap. Significantly higher levels of school-related stress is reported by girls, compared to boys, across different national contexts (Eriksen et al., 2017, p. 94; Klinger et al., 2015; Murberg & Bru, 2004; Östberg et al., 2015). Drawing on the transactional theory of stress, this gender gap may be explained in the amount and severity of stressors, the coping strategies employed, or the evaluation of what is at stake (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Despite similar comprehension of the concept 'stress', and the reported stressors being alike for both genders, girls appear to experience these same stressors at a higher degree (Östberg et al., 2015). Assessing adolescent coping in different regions of the world, the general picture appear to be that adolescents are exhibiting high coping competence (Persike & Seiffge-Krenke, 2012), and more functional compared to dysfunctional coping (Gelhaar et al., 2007). However, some gender differences do exist.

Female adolescents are shown to exhibit higher coping competence compared to males, relying on adaptive coping strategies such as negotiating and help seeking to a greater extent in dealing with school and relationship stressors (Gelhaar et al., 2007; Persike & Seiffge-Krenke, 2012). Unfortunately, adolescent girls are also shown to rely more on the use of emotional outlet and withdrawal (Persike & Seiffge-Krenke, 2012). Although withdrawal can work in the face of uncontrollable stressors, a consistent use of this strategy may lead to maladaptive outcomes in the long run. The level of experienced threat and stress also plays a role in shaping coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 167), and at high levels of stress more maladaptive coping strategies predominate, reflected in more emotional and defensive strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 169). In sum, girls appear to be more competent in employing different coping strategies, but the high degree of experienced stress may lead to more maladaptive coping strategies and vulnerability. Coping is also influenced by self-esteem, and individuals high in self-esteem are more equipped to deal with the negative consequences of stressful life events (Moksnes, Moljord, Espnes, & Byrne, 2010).

In assessing adolescent self-esteem, boys consistently score higher on measures of global self-esteem, compared to girls (Moksnes et al., 2010; Schraml, Perski, Grossi, & Simonsson-Sarnecki, 2011). A distinction is usually made between global self-esteem, and more lower order factors that represent contingent aspect of self-evaluation (Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, & Rosenberg, 1995). Although global self-esteem is related to psychological wellbeing, academic self-esteem is a better predictor of school performance. However, academic self-esteem can influence global self-esteem dependent on how highly academic performance is personally valued (Rosenberg et al., 1995). Girls have a tendency to impose high demands on themselves in regard to their accomplishments at school (Låftman et al., 2013), while at the same time assess their worth against their school attainments (Schraml et al., 2011). A performance-based self-esteem can lead to mental strain and distress, as you need to put all your effort into your accomplishments in order to feel worthy within domains of self-worth investments (Schraml et al., 2011). In that sense there is more at stake for girls, as they need to perform at a high level in order to uphold a positive self-concept, without the protective factors of high global self-esteem.

The high demands that girls impose on themselves, are commonly understood as a result of the highly individualistic culture in the Western part of the world (Wiklund et al., 2010; Östberg et al., 2015). As a consequence of economic and educational changes, new ideas about individual responsibility, and goals achieved by feminism, young girls are given a

‘special’ position within this culture (Harris, 2004). They are expected to be resourceful and successful in several domains in life, making them responsible for their own happiness and accomplishments. In adapting the ‘girls can do anything’-belief, girls are supposed to succeed at school and pursue a career, while at the same time comply with the traditional gender role of a feminine, caring, and attractive woman (Harris, 2004; Wiklund et al., 2010). This belief seems to be internalized, making the external demands posed by society less visible and an integrated part of their identity (Östberg et al., 2015).

The influence of academic program. In assessing school-related stress among upper secondary pupils, little attention has been devoted to the impact of educational program (Landstedt & Gådin, 2012). Landstedt and Gådin (2012) demonstrated that performance-related stressors from marks and internal demands are more prominent among pupils in academic programs, compared to pupils attending vocational programs. However, the vocational program girls reported stress relating to “demand on oneself” and “future plans” to the same extent as academic program pupils, implying that the difference between programs to some extent is due to the low reports among vocational program boys. As previously discussed, emerging adult responsibilities and individualization appear to be more stressful for girls compared to boys, and the higher reports among the girls may be linked to pressure from achievement-focused femininity (Landstedt & Gådin, 2012).

The difference in performance-related stress between academic and vocational program pupils may be related to choice of career path, as pupils with no further interest in higher education have lower stress levels, compared to their university-bound peers (Banks & Smyth, 2015). When attending vocational programs, pupils have the option of attaining a craft certificate and a professional title, making it easier to attend the labor market without pursuing higher education (Nilssen, 2016). Another explanatory model put forward is related to social class, as the pressure to perform is more prominent among middle-class pupils, compared to adolescents from working-class backgrounds (Landstedt & Gådin, 2012; West & Sweeting, 2003). Although pupils from middle-class backgrounds perform better at school, they may experience more parental pressure (Ekren, 2014, p. 20). In the National Youth Survey from 2015, the adolescents from high-income families reported greater parental involvement in their schoolwork, compared to adolescents from families with lower social standing (Bakken, Frøyland, & Sletten, 2016, p. 59-60). In Norway, 70% of the pupils attending vocational programs in 2013 came from families where parents’ educational level

was restricted to primary or secondary school (Ekren, 2014, p. 22), indicating that the proportion of adolescents with a working-class background is higher in vocational programs.

2. Methods

During the planning stage of our master thesis we read two consecutive NOVA reports showing that stress levels were high among Norwegian adolescents (Bakken, 2016; Eriksen et al., 2017), and were intrigued to further investigate the underlying causes of these worrisome statistics. Besides being a recognizable topic of personal interest, this is also a topic that is highly relevant in today's achievement society (Klinger et al., 2015). We believed that the target group could provide important knowledge themselves (Willig, 2015, p. 51). Through a qualitative approach we were able to gather rich and detailed information of the adolescents' own experiences of school stress, the meaning they assign to those experiences (Willig, 2015, p. 52), and discover unexpected consequences of school-related stress (Patton, 2015, p. 13). Accordingly, the research question was addressed by employing semi-structured life-world interviews, with the aim of attaining an understanding of the described phenomena through the interviewees' daily life (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p. 46).

Epistemology

In regards to philosophical framework, we positioned the research project and ourselves on a middle ground between a realist and a relativist perspective. We believe that a reality exists and that this reality is present in the empirical material, but that the informants and our interpretive resources influence the construction of this reality. The informants' accounts represent their individual description of reality, while we as researchers produce interpretations of it, and hold a central and active role in constructing the findings (Clarke, Braun, & Hayfield, 2015, p. 224).

We wanted to understand stress from the informants' perspective, and conversations that opens up for their own interpretations and self-understandings, were necessary in order to understand why they perceive something as a stressor (Patton, 2015, p. 7). Furthermore, we wanted to reflect upon how context impinges on these meanings. This applies for both macro-factors like the individualization of society, and micro-factors such as the interview situation (Kvale & Brinkman, 2015, p. 115). Thus, we adapted a middle position between collecting and constructing knowledge through interviewing, by believing that individual accounts can reflect previous experience, but also expositions that are formed in the specific situation

(Kvale & Brinkman, 2015, p. 67). Knowledge is produced in the dynamic interplay between the interviewer and the interviewee (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p. 335). The aim was not to attain contextual independent, universal knowledge, but to produce rich descriptions from situated knowledge from the interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p. 337). We recognize the relativism of knowledge as socially and historically bound, and that our interpretations can never be unmediated, but rather relative to our time period and culture (Willig, 2013, p. 60). With the realist aim of explaining, the informants' experiences and meanings were interpreted within both a particular theoretical framework and a specific real-world context (Patton, 2015, p. 111, p. 114).

In order to answer our research questions in a satisfactory manner, we applied a broad experiential approach, underpinned by critical realist ontology and contextualist epistemology, to the present study (Clarke et al., 2015, p. 227). Acknowledging that stress develops in close interaction between the individual and contextual circumstances, without rejecting the influence of biological and physical aspects of stress. Our informants could tell us something about how stress is experienced and understood, but their accounts were not considered a direct reflection of the real world, and were interpreted in order to broaden our understanding of the phenomena's fundamental structures (Willig, 2013, p. 67-70).

Reflexivity

In adhering to the qualitative commitment to reflexivity, it is essential to make own preconceptions and implicit assumptions brought into the research project overt to self and others (Malterud, 2001). Through a reflexive and open dialogue, we have managed subjectivity by supplementing and contest each other's statements, resulting in increased awareness of own suppositions. The following discussion will center on our relatedness and emotional involvement with the informants.

Choice of research topic was not coincidental, but deemed relevant for future career interests and inspired by own experiences of academic pressure. When entering the research field we had a preconception that girls would be more stressed compared to boys. This expectation may have formed the questions posed, making us inclined to give a more affirmative response to accounts corroborating our preconception. It was easier to 'accept' when the male informants expressed experiencing low stress-levels, compared to female informants stating the same. Due to own educational background, it was easier to relate to

pupils in the general studies program, compared to pupils from vocational educational programs. This may have influenced the interview dynamic and the questions asked.

In the capacity of being females, close in age, and psychology students, it was at times difficult to hold on to the role as a detached researcher and refrain from giving personal advice. Although we believe that emotional involvement in the adolescents' situation can enrich the breadth and depth in the data, it is essential not to be overly empathic. An overly empathic approach may lead informants to share intimate and private experiences, and regret this later (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p. 109). At the researcher end, being too respectful and comforting may result in shallow empirical material and the risk of losing the critical perspective.

The research project's social and cultural context entails many assumptions that may impact interpretation (Malterud, 2001). It is hard to say how gender could have influenced the research project and the interaction with the informants, as both researchers are females. As previously discussed, Harris (2004) postulated that there is a 'girl can do anything' - belief prevalent in Western societies. In the capacity of being young women, it can be easy to relate to this expectation attached to being female, and it is reason to believe that this influenced the interaction with the informants.

Recruitment and Participants

The study sample consisted of one boy and nine girls from the Education Program for Specialization in General Studies (GS), and four boys and six girls from vocational education programs (VP), all born and raised in Norway. Besides parents' occupation, no socioeconomic measures were collected, and as several informants had limited knowledge about their parents' job, our information about social background was too restricted to say anything about the class distribution in the sample. All pupils were attending their last year of upper secondary school in the eastern part of southern Norway. The average age was 18.3 years, in the age range 17 to 24 years. Although all pupils were attending their last year of formal schooling, there were still small age differences in the sample due to choice of education program or prior schooling. Three different vocational study directions were represented in the study sample, namely "Arts and Crafts", "Construction", and "Restaurant and Food Processing".

The recruitment process was based on purposive sampling, with the primary criterion being that the informant was a final year pupil attending a Norwegian upper secondary

school. Although we aimed for an equal distribution of gender and education program, all participants were identified as equally important independent of stress levels, as we sought out diversity in terms of stress experiences. Gathering information representative for the whole sample population was not the aim of the present study. Rather, we wanted to broaden the understanding of school-induced stress by exploring personal experiences and different perspectives, recognizing pupils as ‘inside experts’.

Recruitment began by sending e-mails with information about the research project to the principals of three potential schools of recruitment. A positive response was given from two of the principals, with the permission to recruit informants and conduct interviews at their school. After examining the teachers’ interest in letting their classes participate, the principals provided us with the teachers’ contact information, and time and place for the presentation was scheduled with each teacher independently. Due to acquaintances in the first school, the corresponding communication and practical issues regarding the recruitment process was well organized and more efficient, compared to the second school.

The project was presented in three classes from the vocational education programs, and two from the program in general studies at the two consecutive schools. The presentation took place during school hours with both researchers present, and lasted approximately 15 minutes. During the presentation, information was given about the project and the interview setting, and it was emphasized that everyone could participate independent of stress levels and gender, and that participation would not influence the pupils’ grades. The pupils were explained what anonymity and confidentiality entails, and about their right to withdraw participation at any stage of the research project. Each pupil also received a written information sheet with the presented information, along with the researchers’ contact details. After the presentation, we stayed for potential questions and queries, and a registration list was passed around where pupils interested in participating could sign up with their name and phone number. All in all, 31 pupils signed up.

After recruitment, potential informants were contacted via text message, containing information about where and when the interview would be conducted, and if they were still interested in taking part. Those who did not respond received a friendly reminder two days later. Two unanswered text messages were considered as “not interested”, and the pupil was not contacted again. In all, four registered informants did not answer to the text messages, and two resigned after answering “yes”. At the first school, the time and place for each interview was clarified with the teachers and the principal, and the interviews took place during school

hours. At the second school, the interviews were scheduled with the informants individually, and the interviews were conducted during free periods between classes.

Although we aimed at recruiting equally many informants of each gender, recruiting boys proved to be more challenging than first anticipated, and the majority of pupils expressing their interest in participating were girls. Consequently, the male participants were discretely prioritized in classes where numerous adolescents signed up for taking part. We also contacted the teachers of three male dominated vocational education programs at the second school, but they did not respond. Due to a limited time frame, and reaching saturation after twenty interviews, it was inexpedient to continue the interviews despite the uneven distribution.

Interview Guide

As reflected in the research questions, the aim of the interview was to acquire detailed descriptions of the potential presence of school stress, and how it may be experienced. The interview guide was developed early in the project period based on previous literature. The guide included open questions pertaining to everyday life, and more narrowly focused questions about the specific phenomenon of interest (see appendix A). The interview questions were structured around four main topics, in addition to introductory questions pertaining to the participants' social background and interests. The first topic was centered on the meaning the informants assign to the word stress, and how stress is experienced. These questions worked as a gateway for more specific questions regarding school stressors. The next topic covered the presence, nature, and experience of school stressors, in addition to relevant support systems and coping resources. The two remaining focus areas were pupils' performance standards, and choice of educational program and future plans.

The scope of the interview was narrow, focusing on school-related stressors and academic pressure, but still open for informants to elaborate. By employing semi-structured interviews we were able to explore interesting topic trajectories that appeared during the interview, while at the same time ensuring that all the main topics were covered. The interviews did not follow a strict order, and the questions followed freely based on the accounts of the informants. Although the interview was directed towards specific aspects, we allowed for diversions out of respect for the informants. These diversions also led to unexpected and important information.

The Interview Context

As pointed out by Kvale and Brinkmann (2015, p. 36), the interview context is a place of knowledge production between the interviewer and the interviewees. This knowledge is contextual and dependent on the social relation in the interview setting, influenced by both the characteristics of the informant and the researcher. The research interview is not a neutral conversation between equals, and it is important not to neglect the asymmetrical power balance that exists (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p. 20). The researcher defines and controls the conversation by initiating the interview, deciding what issues to explore, and finally end the conversation. The goal is not to eliminate this power imbalance from the research interview, but instead reflect on the issue.

Although an equal relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee in a qualitative interview setting seem unrealistic, we attempted to shed off power by emphasizing that there were no right or wrong answers, that the informant was the expert on the subject, and that the research interest was to gain insight into his or hers experience. Regardless of our deliberate attempt to diminish the lopsided power distribution, some of the informants needed reassurance that the answer they provided was satisfactory. During or after some of the interviews the interviewee also posed questions to the interviewer. Some questions were of a more general nature, such as asking about university and what it is like to study psychology; others of more personal character. The adolescent period is often characterized by uncertainty (Östberg et al., 2015), and our characteristics and educational background may have made the informants more inclined to ask questions and seek advice from us. In these instances, finding the optimal balance between being private and professional proved challenging, and we became more aware of our central role in the research project.

Interviews

The data collection period lasted approximately two months, and took place during the school fall semester. Good communication and collaboration with the school administration was essential, and helped enable the recruitment process. It was important to have the interviews conducted within a short period of time, as time of year may influence pupils' stress levels due to end of semester exams.

To familiarize ourselves with the interview guide, we conducted two trial interviews each with fellow university students. Although the trial participants were a bit older than the

target group, it was beneficial to gain interview experience and test the interview guide. We also conducted one pilot test with a younger cousin of one of us, to ensure that the guide was written in an age appropriate language. This led to some minor changes, and some questions were removed. During pilot testing we experienced difficulties in asking relevant follow-up questions, and giving enough time for the interviewee to respond. This was also an issue during the first interviews we conducted. To ensure a better quality, both researchers listened to each other's first interviews and discussed how we could improve by asking relevant follow-up questions. Moving forward, the quality of the interviews was improved as we became more secure in our role as an interviewer. Initially, it was somewhat difficult not to feel bound by the interview guide, but after a while the interviews were freer in the sense that we followed our informants' line of thinking. At times it was challenging to get rich and detailed accounts, as some informants were shy than others. Asking more specific questions or rephrasing them was necessary in order to gain deeper insights among these informants.

The interviews were conducted in small group study rooms at each participating school. To create a more relaxing atmosphere, the participants were offered beverage and chocolate. To ensure minimal noise and distractions the interviews were carried out during school hours, and not during recess. Oral and written information about the study was provided at the start of each interview. All interviews were tape recorded, and lasted on average one hour. At the end of each interview, the interviewer summed up the main essence and conclusions from the interview orally to the informant, so that the informant could confirm or make corrections. This was a way of ensuring that the interviewer understood the interviewee, and to clarify any misunderstandings.

We carried out half of the interviews each, and only one of us was present during each interview. As pointed out by Kvale and Brinkmann (2015, p. 49), different interviewers using the same guide can produce different knowledge due to varying degree of sensitivity and preexisting understanding. It is difficult to know how this has influenced the data collection, but we have tried to minimize the difference by having a close communication and sharing of experiences throughout the data collection process. This has also worked to our advantage, as we were able to discuss own uncertainties, and provide support and feedback for each other.

After each interview, we wrote down our initial thoughts and contemplations, such as the interview atmosphere, the informant's clothing and demeanor, and the social interplay between the interviewer and interviewee. We also wrote down what happened after the tape recorder was switched off. This helped us remember the interview context more clearly, and

kept us more sensitized to subtle changes during transcription. These notes also provided important input to subsequent analysis, as we wrote down possible themes and initial reflections immediately after each interview was finalized.

Transcribing the interviews. We transcribed each other's interviews in an effort to familiarize ourselves with the entire empirical material. The interviews were transcribed concurrently as they proceeded. This was a great opportunity for the researchers to learn from each other, improve interview skills, and provide feedback. During transcription we became aware of new aspects of the phenomenon of interest, what questions that elicited detailed accounts or closed off a theme, and what aspects that should have been followed-up more thoroughly. To ensure consistency during transcription we agreed on the form of transcription beforehand. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, including pauses, repetitions, hesitations, non-words such as "eh" and "hmm", and emotional expressions. To ensure anonymity all identifiable markers were changed.

Quotes. Due to the nature of spoken language, the quotes presented in the thesis was edited to resemble written language, as the literal transcription is less coherent and might be stigmatizing for the interviewee (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p. 213). Although we have tried to keep the quotes as close to the spoken word as possible, there is always the risk of losing meaning. The interviews and transcriptions were conducted in Norwegian. After selecting quotes to be presented in the thesis, we translated them into English. To make sure that valuable information and meaning was maintained, the quotes were translated back to Norwegian by another researcher, and compared with the initial quotes.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed by means of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is recognized as a foundational method, as identifying thematized meaning is a common feature across qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method is suitable for identifying, analyzing, and summarizing large amount of material into coherent and meaningful themes, and thus the most appropriate choice considering our research aim, the range of our data set, and the number of interviews. The analysis was based on the big Q approach to thematic analysis, by exploring the meanings and lived experiences of the informants through open-ended and inductive research (Willig, 2015, p. 52-53). To ensure that the analysis was conducted in a deliberate and rigorous way, we used Braun and Clarke's

(2006) guidelines as the basis of our analytical work. The method was tailored to the specific research project, and the steps taken in the analytical process is presented below.

Getting familiar with the data set. By transcribing the interviews ourselves we gained familiarity with the entire data set. A thorough, inductive reading of the entire empirical material followed transcription, where we wrote down initial thoughts and possible themes, before writing a summary of each interview. The summaries enabled us to get a better grasp of the essence and story portrayed.

Generating initial codes. The coding process began by highlighting specific aspects of the data of interest throughout the entire empirical material, coding both at a semantic and latent level (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We began by coding the transcripts of two key informants, as their accounts were more detailed, elaborative, and surprising. The initial coding was data-driven, but our prior experience with school-induced stress and preliminary readings shaped coding to some extent. To strengthen the analysis, we coded the same ten transcripts each and compared our initial codes. The remaining transcripts were divided between the researchers. No data items was left at this stage, except private stories relating to family dynamics, as these stories could compromise anonymity and were not deemed relevant for the research topic. The initial codes were categorized into clusters with matching data extracts in separate computer files. The data extracts included the interviewer question and some of the surrounding data to ensure that context was not lost.

Searching for themes. In the next phase, we sorted different codes into potential themes and sub-themes by employing mind-maps and post-it notes. This process was challenging, as some codes could represent more than one theme, and the codes were rearranged several times. We stayed close to the empirical material, without much support from literature. Nothing was abandoned at this stage. Certain issues were deemed as particularly relevant and interesting, and these were explored in more detail by posing questions to the text. It proved challenging to pose analytical questions that was distinct from the interview questions, but after rereading and comparing categories across the informants' accounts, we developed analytical questions that guided the subsequent analysis. This resulted in three analytical questions: "*Why is this stressful?*", "*What is at stake for the individual?*", and "*What conscious and unconscious coping strategies are employed?*". We searched for both convergence and divergence in the informant's accounts, and across different interviews. The focus was to investigate aspects of the experience, rather than individuals, especially the differences and similarities between groups based on gender and educational program. Each

transcript was investigated thoroughly and systematically, undergoing the same analytical approach.

Reviewing themes. At the beginning of this phase we sought out guidance from our co-supervisor, to get a third perspective on the empirical material and the preliminary categorization. We reread the coded data extracts in each theme to ensure internal homogeneity (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and some data extracts were rearranged to form a new theme or placed in a different theme. Some sub-themes were merged together, as it reflected variations of the overlying issue and not distinct categories. At the end of this stage we had a good idea of the interconnectedness between the different themes and sub-themes, and the overall story we wanted to tell based on the collected material.

Defining and naming themes. Beginning this phase, we sorted out the themes we believed could shed light on the issues posed in our research questions. The analysis to this point resulted in four themes we believe captures the essence of the informants' accounts, including disruptions and similarities in individual accounts and across different interviews. The disruption between the rational and intentional, and the more emotional aspects of the participants' accounts were especially intriguing. At this stage we moved from a more phenomenological description given by the participants, to a more interpretative abstraction viewing the accounts at a more overarching level. We started to incorporate theory to contribute to heightened understanding of the empirical material. The themes were sorted in a consecutive order, based on how they are connected to each other. The focus throughout the analysis was providing a rich description of the entire data set. However, our focus has mainly been on the school as a working arena, as these issues were most prominent in the data material compared to social issues.

Producing the report. In producing the report we have remained a focus on the high-achieving girls, as we early on discovered that they appeared most stressed compared to the rest of the sample. In analytically foregrounding gender and academic program, we have tried to increase our understanding of adolescents' stress by contrasting and comparing individual accounts on the basis of study direction and gender where this is applicable, highlighting both differences and commonalities. We have kept a focus on the wider context, and reflected on how the adolescents' experiences fit in the Western society characterized by individualization (Låftman et al., 2013). In choosing the quotes to be presented, we have received help from our supervisors, to ensure that the quotes represent the findings in the best way.

Throughout the analyses, we have held continuous discussions regarding content and interpretation, resulting in a negotiated result. Although our analytical perspectives were quite similar, we had the benefit of bringing two points of view to the empirical material, and validate the analytical categories through collaboration. Applying thematic analysis to our empirical material was beneficial, as the guidelines provided by Braun & Clarke (2006) provided us with clear instructions on how to approach the analytical endeavor. However, it was challenging to decide what counts as a theme and underlying sub-themes, and we chose to categorize themes on the basis of what was most common, but also what we perceived as striking and interesting.

Ethical Considerations

In regards to the formal ethical guidelines, the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) have approved the project (see appendix B), and the study follows their standards for secure storage of personal information. The tape recordings and transcripts were securely stored on two different encrypted USB-sticks. All informants agreed to being tape-recorded, and signed an informed consent form written in an age appropriate language (see appendix C). Common practice implies that participants over the age of 15 can consent to take part in research if the project is not gathering sensitive information (NESH, 2016, p. 20). All procedures were conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines posed by the Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees (NESH). It is recommended that the researchers have the opportunity to cope with own difficulties experienced in relation to the research project (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2007). In this study the researchers have served as each other's debriefing partner and support system.

All personal information and references to places or third persons were made anonymous, or completely omitted from the present report. The vocational education programs were renamed, as some of them are only offered at a few schools in Norway. All informants were given fictive names that were used from the time of transcription.

Sensitive questions. The present study was not designed to tap therapeutic matters or investigate sensitive questions. The participants were informed prior to the interview that they decided which questions to answer, and how much they wanted to tell. However, questions about stressful events, personal reactions, and future plans evoked personal and sensitive stories in some instances, and made some informants uncomfortable. Kvale and Brinkmann (2015, p. 96) discuss the ethical dilemma emerging in situations like these, where the

researcher attempts to obtain detailed and deep accounts, while at the same time remaining respectful towards the interviewee. Keeping this in mind, stories about sensitive questions or themes other than the ones in interest were not investigated any further, as they usually concerned private events or family matters. We tried to comment and encourage as little as possible, while at the same time show understanding for the informants' situation. The interviews were conducted at school grounds, ensuring that the informants were in a familiar and safe environment. In addition, we made sure that counselling with a school nurse was possible, in case informants needed someone to talk to on a more professional level after the interview.

3. A Closer Look at the Experience of School-Related Stress

This chapter presents the findings of the analytical endeavor, and is guided by the three analytical questions posed to the empirical material. During the interviews, it became apparent that the most common determinant of school-related stress was school performance and academic demands. Based on our analytical interests and what we believed was most striking, we have structured the empirical material into four major recurrent and inter-related themes, namely “day-to-day stressors at school”, “securing future prospects”, “the only acceptable alternative is being the best”, and “coping with imposing demands”. Each main theme is structured around sub-themes that represent important aspects of the main theme. The aim is to present aspects of the stress experience, and how this experience differs on the basis of gender and educational program.

Theme 1: Day-to-Day Stressors at School

Here, we investigate what daily stressors the pupils experienced in school. As the pupils spend a lot of their time at school, these daily stressors are of importance, because their cumulative effect on adaptation and health can be as detrimental as major life changes (Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer, & Lazarus, 1981).

Time pressure. When asked to define what stress entails, the informants commonly understood stress in terms of uncontrollable competing demands, and having a lot to do in combination with limited time. Stress relating to time pressure was a recurrent topic, and several pupils in both educational programs experienced difficulties in reconciling schoolwork and leisure activities, having minimal time available to pursue own interests and

spend time with friends. Hege (18, GS) for instance, explained how she never initiated meeting friends, claiming she did not have time for it. If friends invited her, she only stayed for a couple of hours before returning to her schoolwork.

This time pressure was viewed as a result of overload of schoolwork, fear of falling behind, course deadlines, and clustering of tests and exams. This is demonstrated in the account by Vilde (18, GSP) where she explained everything that was pending at school the week of the interview: *“Yesterday I had a test, and tomorrow I have a history test, and then another test on Thursday, so it’s difficult to manage it all right now!”*. The reasons for this time pressure was commonly understood as a result of bad communication and planning among the teachers, and several pupils mentioned the unwillingness by teachers to adjust the scheduling of exams and tests. Vilde (18, GS) for instance, asked for more flexibility from the teachers, and wished that they could *“just listen to us when we say that it’s too much this week. Just be a little more forthcoming by saying “yes, we can reschedule that test or have it the week before””*. The informants’ accounts illustrate how they have little control and influence over the school demands, with minimal time to accomplish everything that is expected of them at school.

The teachers’ expectations. The great majority of the interviewed pupils cared about living up to the teachers’ expectations, since living up to them was equivalent with doing something good, and doing the right thing. However, this was also a great source of stress as these expectations were described as implicit and unclear. After receiving a test result, Johan (17, VP) often wondered *“What did I do right? What did I do wrong?”*. Several informants explained how they strived to do what was right in the eyes of their teachers, but that this was challenging due to insufficient feedback. Trine (18, GS) for instance, talked about how her teachers usually commented on the things she did well in an assignment, and at times pointed out the things she could do better. Still, she wanted the teachers’ expectations to be clearer:

“They need to be more open about where you’re going and what it takes to get there, because now you never know if what you hand in is good enough, or if the studying you did prior to a test is good enough. You just have to practice, and practice, and practice, and when you take the test, it turns out to be much easier than anticipated”

As the teachers never told her explicitly what she needed to change in order to achieve a better result, or what they expected of her in particular, Trine felt that she was *“shooting in the dark”*. Several informants also felt frustrated with the divergence in what the teachers expected, and what they actually communicated. *“Well, they say different things...one says,*

“do this”, while another one says “no, don’t do that, do this”. So, it’s kind of stressful not knowing for sure what you’re really supposed to do”, Ida (17, VP) said. Taken together, the pupils’ explanations indicate that not knowing what is expected of them impose great levels of stress, as it becomes difficult to improve their school performance and meet the teachers’ expectations.

Benchmarking, what grade did you attain? The majority of the pupils talked about the tendency to compare marks and test results with each other, and many found this comparison stressful. *“What did you get? What grade did you achieve?”* was common questions among the pupils after they received test results, Caroline (18, GS) explained. For Caroline this was experienced as uncomfortable, as she feared being labeled as ‘dumb’ by her classmates, although she felt satisfied by the mark she obtained. This was more predominant among the average-achieving pupils. The high-achieving pupils, mainly girls, used their peers’ grades as a yardstick against their own achievements, and felt pressured to uphold the same grade standard. If her friend performed better than her on a test, Trine (18, GS) felt disappointed and stressed out before the next test. *“Because she managed to get a good grade now, I need to be better than her the next time. It’s like a loss every time she performs better than me”,* she explained. This feeling of disappointment was common among the high-achieving girls in general studies, and both Sunniva (18, GS) and Eva (18, GS) thought *“What did I do wrong?”* when their friends out-performed them on a test.

Comparing test results with close friends who were similar to them was normal among all the pupils. However, for the high-achieving girls in general studies, this also entailed that the feeling of accomplishment suddenly changed if their friends performed better, as pointed out by Eva (18, GS): *“Like, I feel that we are on the same level, so when I get grade 5 and my friend get grade 6 I feel like I’ve done something bad”*. The high-performing girls seemed to place great value on their relative performance position in their peer group, and this could be stressful due to the high standard of reference.

This competing and comparing of test results was perceived as stressful for the majority, but to a lesser degree among the boys. Sindre (18, VP) explained how he compared his craft product with a product that received a higher grade. For him, this was a good learning opportunity. Although the boys also had a tendency to compare test results, they appeared to place less value on how others achieved. A couple of the pupils realized that comparing grades was detrimental, and tried to change their mind-set. Katarina (17, VP) said that competing with her classmates only created unnecessary stress, and she chose to focus on

her own achievements instead. Johan (17, VP) acknowledged that people are different, and possess different qualities of equal importance:

“If someone is better than me at school, I might be better than them at something else. Just because they are better than me at school doesn’t mean that I need to be as good as them, because we’re different. And that’s okay.”

Although Johan had tried to change his chain of thought, he said it was difficult to refrain from comparing himself with others, *“It’s a problem I have, comparing myself with others. Thinking that everyone is better than me”*. This account demonstrates the conflict between the rational and emotional, and although many pupils were aware that comparing test results was damaging and stressful, they had difficulties in breaking the pattern.

Discussion. Conceptualizing stress as an imbalance between school demands and limited time to accomplish it all, corresponds well with the academic understanding of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and is also reflected in the daily hassles outlined by the informants. Although daily hassles are less dramatic than major life changes, they are important in adaptation and health (Kanner et al., 1981; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 12). Daily hassles are characterized as distressing demands occurring in everyday transactions with the environment, and is often experienced as more demanding due to its frequency and on-going nature, whose cumulative impact on health is important to address (Kanner et al., 1981; Persike & Seiffge-Krenke, 2012). When talking about a normal school day, time pressure was a recurrent topic among the great majority of the interviewed pupils. Difficulties in balancing schoolwork and leisure activities, and the clustering of exams and tests, were perceived by the majority as a great source of stress, corroborating previous research (Låftman et al., 2013; Östberg et al., 2014).

The teachers were experienced as in control of the school demands, with the pupils having minimal opportunity for co-determination. According to the demand-control model of work stress, the combination of high demands and lack of control in the workplace can result in stress and increased vulnerability to psychological health complaints (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). For the adolescents, the school environment is comparable to a workplace in many ways due to the amount of time they spend there and demands from schoolwork (Hjern et al., 2008). As such, the risk factors outlined by the job demand-control model may be transferrable to the pupils’ situation. In addition to controlling the scheduling of homework and tests, the teachers have the authority to decide and evaluate what is ‘right’ and ‘good’

behaviour at school (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2013, p. 202), and for the majority of the informants, living up to the teachers' expectations was important.

With the teacher being in control and somewhat responsible for the pupils' future success by determining their final marks (Låftman et al., 2013), it is not surprising that the informants were concerned about how they were perceived in the eyes of their teacher. Meeting the teachers' demands by doing the 'right' thing was a common worry among the great majority, especially as these demands and expectations often were perceived as vague and implicit, and as Trine (GS) portrayed it, the pupils were "*shooting in the dark*". It seems that the teachers have a central role in influencing pupils' stress levels at school, an important aspect that will be discussed more thoroughly in the implications section.

Adolescents do not only meet demands posed by their teachers, but also in relation to their classmates (Låftman et al., 2013). In adolescence, external feedback and social comparison are important determinants when evaluating their self-worth and adequacy of their performance (Covington, 1984; Schraml, 2013). In our study, comparing test results with close friends was common. According to Festinger (1954), humans have a basic need to evaluate own abilities and ascertain accurate self-evaluations, which is obtained through comparison with others similar to themselves, or with someone who performs slightly better. However, accurate self-evaluations may not always be the primary goal, and in the Western culture there is a tendency to continually improve own abilities beyond the abilities of the comparison other (Dijkstra, Kuyper, van der Werf, Buunk, & van der Zee, 2008).

The school arena is a setting where comparisons are made on a daily basis (Låftman et al., 2013), and where the chosen comparison target is usually someone who performs better than yourself (Dijkstra et al., 2008). This is a tendency that was also reflected in this study. This upward comparison and strive for self-improvement can lead to better performance, but it can also enhance negative affect and lower academic self-concept by reminding the pupils that they are 'secondary' (Dijkstra et al., 2008). Social comparison is more common among girls, compared to boys (Dijkstra et al., 2008), and in the present study, the high-achieving girls in general studies were most inclined to compare test results. These high-achieving girls got disappointed and felt inferior if their mark was below the performance of their peers. It appears that even if they perform above average, this is inadequate if their friend outperforms them. Being outperformed by someone close to them may also be experienced as more threatening, compared to being outperformed by a stranger, as the target person is of greater importance in the pupil's life, and thereby enhances the stress appraisal (Dijkstra et al., 2008).

When the pupils evaluate their standing in the group, they often neglect the performance level of the class as a whole (Låftman et al., 2013). This is referred to as the “big-fish little pond effect”, indicating that pressure is higher in a high-performing context, even if ability is generally high (Låftman et al., 2013). Competitive school environments increase this negative effect of social comparison on pupils’ self-concept, as it creates fewer rewards (Covington, 1984). This may lead many to abandon the positive coping strategies associated with striving for success, and to only be concerned about avoiding failure. Furthermore, it magnifies the positive affect associated with success, but also the negative affect that follows with failure, such as shame and guilt. This might explain why the feeling of disappointment was more common among the girls in general studies, compared to vocational pupils, as competition was higher. Social comparison in classes where the academic standard is high, is shown to evoke more evaluative anxiety (Dijkstra et al., 2008), and may be one of the reasons why this was experienced as more stressful among the pupils in general studies, compared to their vocational counterparts.

Although the vocational program pupils also perceived comparing test results as stressful, they appear to have more distance to it or seeing it more as a learning opportunity. In contrast to the pupils in general studies, the vocational program pupils have the opportunity to compare a test result on the basis of a physical product, such as a chair or a food course, making it easier to see what separates a lower grade from a higher one. For the pupils in general studies, it may be more difficult to see what others did differently on a test to obtain a higher grade, making it more challenging to improve their performance.

Theme 2: Securing Future Prospects

The consequences of the short-term stressors were not only important on a day-to-day basis, but also related to future life chances. In the following section, we look at the long-term concerns related to school performance, and its relevance for future education and occupational attainment.

The future hinges on good grades. *“I remember coming home after performing poorly on a test, crying so much – like, thinking that even more of my future is ruined”* (Trine, 18, GS). The majority of the pupils in this study emphasized the importance of good grades for future options and life chances, as they felt that their life was determined now. For the informants, great prospects in life seemed to hinge on attaining a good education. A proper

education would then lead to a decent job and a stable economy, which was equivalent with success in life. A bad grade, on the other hand, entailed putting their future at stake, as they would not reach far in life and risk a life of ‘failure’, poverty, or getting a job that is frowned upon by society. Trine (18, GS) explained how she feared being one of those who “*don’t do anything with their life*”, while Christian (24, VP) did not want to “*end up with a regular job. Like, working at the supermarket, or something*”.

The importance of good grades in securing future prospects was a common thought among the pupils from all study programs, but some differences did exist. For the pupils in the general study program, achieving good grades was deemed far more important than learning something, as one single grade could make or break their future. Attaining a high grade point average on the school-leaving certificate was essential due to the high admission requirements for entry to post-school education. As the pupils attended their last year of formal schooling, all grades were final, and deemed equally important. Susanne (18, GS) for instance, explained how she initially wanted to become a psychologist, but that “*that’s actually impossible now, because of that one grade 4 that I already have! (...) Like, that’s a fact!*”. For some girls in the vocational programs, a high grade point average was important in order to be admitted in the supplementary program for general university admission certification. However, for the majority of vocational program pupils, good grades were central in order to be accepted to the apprenticeship of their choosing. Several informants, independent of gender, explained how they prioritized the vocational subjects, as future employment depend specifically on these grades.

With good grades being perceived as vital for own life chances, the majority of the pupils placed enormous weight on their performance in the final exams, since the exam results are directly transferred to the school-leaving certificate. About half of the informants, most of whom were girls from general studies, mentioned exams as stressful as they only had one chance to perform. Many of the pupils with university-level expectations were not stressed about passing their exams, but whether they would obtain the right grade in order to attain their preferred university degree. Susanne (18, GS) said she constantly checked the admission requirements for her desired university program to know what grade point average she needed in order to be admitted, “*even though it doesn’t change! Because, it only changes once a year!*”. Guaranteeing that the right grade was achieved became a vital priority, like Eva (18, GS) explained:

“You know, going out once, and like, ruining a grade on an exam that can mean a lot on the school leaving certificate. Like, it’s not worth it, when I feel that it almost – a little harsh to say but – can destroy my life.”

For about half of the pupils, the fear of not getting their first choice of higher education or career path appeared to result in obsessing about school and school-related achievements. They spent a disproportionate amount of time studying, and made a deliberate choice of having school as their number one priority. Giving up leisure activities and prioritizing school was common among girls and boys from both educational programs. Christian (24, VP) for instance, described how he always declined working at his part-time job if he had pending schoolwork to do, because *“School comes first. Always”*.

For some, this obsession over school was experienced as frustrating, and Lotte (18, GS) felt that school had taken over her life. She portrayed it like this:

“It’s awful to say that school has taken over your life. But that’s how it is (...). You feel like you live, and go to school, and school even more with higher education and stuff like that – and then you work, and like, then you die.”

Although this was how she felt, Lotte was also one of the few informants who reflected on her situation and tried to dissociate herself from it. As she said, *“no matter what, you’ll get a decent education, and a nice job, and a nice life”*. She thought her classmates should try to enjoy life while they can. Katarina (17, VP) shared her point of view:

“I don’t care that much about getting the highest grades, as long as I pass and do something, and actually care about my future (...) I’ve got a backup plan and everything. If this and that happens, it happens. Then I’ll just let it go.”

Although Katarina deemed the future as very important, she knew that there were alternative roads. Johan (17, VP) had actually experienced receiving a disappointing grade at an exam, and said that this resulted in new opportunities and few drastic life changes. This more optimistic view of the future was atypical, and the majority of the informants felt that their life chances was determined now and highly dependent on achieving the right grades.

A new era. Several of the girls in general studies talked about how their parents grew up in another time. As the great majority of the parents got a job directly after finishing upper secondary school, without a higher education, they were perceived as unable to understand the situation of youths today. Susanne (18, GS) described it like this:

“Well, everyone knows that it’s not like before, when you got a job right after finishing upper secondary school (...) Nowadays, people with a bachelors degree are applying for jobs at the supermarket, so you almost have to have something. An education.”

Likewise, Hege (18, GS) had tried to explain to her parents that upper secondary school today is incomparable to school twenty years ago, and said that *“there’s a lot more pressure in an educational society, compared to when they could just get a job at the age of 16”*.

Despite growing up in another time, the high-achieving norm and keeping options open for the future were also deemed important for some of the parents. Several of the female informants talked about parental expectations centered on performing well, acquiring a higher education, and maintaining a focus on school. These types of experiences concerned mostly girls in the vocational programs, as attending general studies was considered a more acceptable educational choice, compared to vocational education, by several parents. Because her parents did not have a university degree themselves, and Eva (18, GS) was the first in her family to attend the program for general studies, she felt pressured to excel in order to show her family that she is better than them, and on a path towards a good future. Katarina (17, VP) also felt pressured by her parents. They expected her to follow in their footsteps, as they had pursued a higher education. She explained it like this:

“In order to avoid hearing him [her father] talk negatively or sarcastic about what I’ve done, or what I actually do, I need to get good grades (...). And my mom (...), she says, “If you get good grades, you’ll get a good future and a good education””

Even though the parental expectations varied, education was deemed important for most of the parents, reflecting the social standard characterizing today’s society. Several pupils considered a three-year university degree the norm, and some even felt that a master’s degree was necessary in order to stand out. Susanne (18, GS) said, *“I feel like maybe (...) in a way, the society expects you to perform”*, and the majority of girls, and a couple of boys, agreed with her. Christian (24, VP) initially chose general studies when entering upper secondary school, although he actually did not want to, as higher education was portrayed as the only right thing to do. His story confirms the adolescents’ perception of what a good future entails. In addition, it reflects the pupils’ tendency to put others’ opinions over their own. For instance, several female informants agreed with Vilde (18, GS), who claimed that it was important to be a good girl, and do everything she was told to do. Taken together, this indicates that future prospects are not solely shaped by individual desires, but influenced by external demands posed by parents and the society as a whole.

Future plans. Attaining good marks was closely related to future plans, but this was also influenced by how certain the adolescents were about their future and choice of career path. Having an abundance of options seemed to be a source of great stress for those pupils unsure about their future prospects, as it denoted a need to excel to make sure that all options were available. This was a common thought among the pupils, as said by Sunniva (18, GS):

“If you don’t know what you want to become, you should care even more! Then there’s nothing that can guide you. So, in order to guarantee that you have as many options open as possible, you need to work hard.”

Future-related performance stress was most prevalent among the university-bound pupils, compared to those wanting to attain a craft certificate. As the pupils in general studies do not attain a craft certificate, a higher education was perceived as the only plausible option and necessary in order to thrive. Despite the uncertainty, the girls especially dreamt about a job that carries prestige and status. When asked about future plans, the high-achieving girls mentioned psychology, diplomat, law, and medicine, as possible study directions, all studies with high admission requirements.

For the informants attending the vocational education programs, the future was portrayed as more predictable, as a craft certificate and a professional title makes it easier to attend the labor market. Although the pupils in vocational programs appeared less stressed about the future, there were some concerns regarding apprenticeship and getting a satisfying job. About half of the vocational program pupils, most of whom were boys, wanted to do their apprenticeship training and get their trade certificate. A few female respondents desired a higher education, and wanted to attend the supplementary program for general university and college admissions certificate. However, some pupils experienced uncertainty and ambivalence about the future, like Miriam (18, VP) who felt that *“it’s a choice that affects the rest of your life”*. She explained how she was excited about finishing upper secondary school, but at the same time dreaded the life-defining choice she needed to make.

Discussion. Our findings demonstrate how the pupils placed enormous weight on their school-performance in their final year of upper secondary school, because of its consequences for future prospects open to them when school ends. This may be one of the reasons why adolescents’ stress levels reach a peak at the end of upper secondary school, reflected in the National Youth Survey in 2017 (Bakken, 2017, p. 78). Consistent with previous research (Banks & Smyth, 2015; Landstedt & Gådin, 2012; Murberg & Bru, 2004), stress relating to

performing for the future was more prominent among academic program pupils, university-bound pupils, and girls. These are important differences that will be discussed subsequently.

Most of the pupils expressed an ‘all-or-nothing’ understanding of their future options and believed that their life was defined now. Many of the pupils believed that receiving a bad grade on the school-leaving certificate would ruin their entire life. Social defeat appears to be perceived as one of the most profound consequences, as getting a ‘regular’ job or not ‘becoming something’ seems to be equivalent with being poor and having low social status. Not being frowned upon by society by retaining a ‘regular’ job is a realistic concern, as poor achievements represent a potential for social scrutiny and endangering ones identity (Eriksen et al., 2017, p. 100). However, as discussed by Eriksen et al. (2017, p. 100), these concerns are highly exaggerated among the high-achieving adolescents, a trend also reflected in this study. In Norway, admission to higher schooling is available for everyone with a school leaving certificate from upper secondary school, meaning that all adolescents have the opportunity to get an education independent of their grade point average (Nilssen, 2012).

Despite the wealth of options available after finishing upper secondary school, the majority of the informants, especially those attending general studies, saw a higher education of at least three years as the only plausible choice. This idea is strongly embedded in the Norwegian society, and is so pervasive that it is difficult to formulate and exercise active resistance (Eriksen et al., 2017, p. 100). As stated by the former Minister of Education and Research in Norway, Torbjørn Røe Isaksen (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017), *“Higher education is the key to economic growth and competitiveness, social development, and a fuller life for each individual”* (p. 3, own translation). A more competitive school environment seems to be emerging with the introduction of the PISA-tests in 2000, and greater importance placed on higher schooling when entering the job market (Klinger et al., 2015; Sletten & Bakken, 2016). This implies that to be successful and obtain a socially valued job, the only option is to pursue a higher education. Increasing competitiveness entails performing at a high level in order to stand out, and may be the reason for the high aspiration level among some of the pupils. This idea is also reflected in the high-status university degrees mentioned by the informants.

During the last decade, there has been a progress towards knowledge societies within neoliberal economies, where individual responsibility has a strong foothold (Phoenix, 2004). As pointed out by Hege (18, GS), the pressure is higher in a knowledge society. In the contemporary Western society, characterized by individualization and competition,

adolescents are responsible for their own success (Francis, Skelton, & Read, 2012; Harris, 2004). This is also reflected in the national curriculum in Norway, where pupils are made accountable for their own learning (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2015, p. 11). This puts a lot of responsibility on today's adolescents, and is shown to be a great source of stress (Wiklund et al., 2010).

The informants described a distinction between the social standard of today's society and their parents' generation, where higher education was less imperative in entering the labor market. Still, the high-achieving norm of today was reflected in the parents' aspirations for their children. As experienced by the informants, some parents encouraged the adolescents' high aspirations by imposing both explicit and implicit expectations on to their children to keep options open for the future, corroborating the previous finding by Låftman et al. (2013). One reason may be because of the parents' own lack of possibilities when finishing upper secondary school, wanting their children to take advantage of the vast opportunities available to them. In desiring a better future for their children, it appears that some parents only see general studies as the acceptable choice, due to the possibilities available when graduating from this program. Although the majority claimed to experience little parental pressure, some were frustrated, as their parents did not understand the pressure tied to today's educational society.

With a wealth of options follows more freedom, but also greater uncertainty and responsibility (Eriksen et al., 2017, p. 98; Låftman et al., 2013). As a result, pupils may impose great pressure on themselves in order to attain their desired future. Uncertainty about the future can influence adolescents' stress levels (Banks & Smyth, 2015), and some informants experienced it as too soon and too difficult to decide their entire life now. As reflected in the informants' accounts, it seems like all their life-defining choices need to be made in their last year of upper secondary school. Performance-related stress was higher among academic program pupils and university-bound pupils. It is more common that adolescents from families with lower socio-economic status desire a non-academic education (Bakken et al., 2016, p. 59), and in our study, several of the vocational program pupils wished to pursue a specific profession not requiring a university degree. One reason that this is perceived as less stressful may be that they are heading towards a more secure future and know more what to expect, compared to their academic counterparts. In contrast, many of the academic program pupils were uncertain about their career path, and the abundance of possibilities seemed to evoke feelings of uncertainty and great responsibility. Independent of

educational program, hard work was recognized as a premise for reaching their goals, as demonstrated in the informants' accounts about prioritizing the subjects with importance for the school-leaving certificate, whether this was the vocational subjects or all the final subjects.

In regards to gender differences, the female informants showed greater commitment to their future compared to the boys, reflecting the gender role embedded in the individualistic society (Landstedt & Gådin, 2012). This gender gap can also be connected to the adolescents' maturity level, with girls being more mature than boys throughout adolescence (Murberg & Bru, 2004), being able to think ahead, and being more aware of the negative consequences of academic failure. The fact that more vocational program girls, compared to vocational program boys, planned to pursue a higher education may also be due to the gender separated labor market in vocational domains, where female dominated unskilled jobs are low or minimum wage (Landstedt & Gådin, 2012). This implies that girls wanting to pursue a vocational career are more dependent on higher education, compared to males in vocational occupations.

The girls in general studies appear to have internalized the demands from society at the highest degree, wanting to attain a prestigious job. When external demands are internalized, it is harder to obtain a distance to them (Wiklund & Bengs, 2012). Achieving high marks seems to be motivated by fulfilling external demands, as opposed to being motivated by personal joy and autonomy. According to the Self-Determination Theory, being extrinsically motivated can increase feelings of negative stress, as the goals you pursue are not your own, and there is little flexibility in what is perceived as a satisfying outcome (Weinstein & Ryan, 2011). This results in a self-worth contingent on a certain outcome, as well as the tendency to evaluate situations as threatening to own self-esteem. This will be the subject of discussion in the next theme.

Theme 3: The Only Acceptable Alternative is Being the Best

As seen in the previous section, the most common answer to why grades were important was related to securing future prospects. However, ability and achievement had different meanings for the informants, as we will investigate in the following theme. We will also show how different aspiration levels were related to different stress experiences.

Aspiration level. The majority of the girls in general studies experienced school as stressful due to their own high standards and aspirations, as they placed a lot of pressure on themselves to excel at school. Sunniva (18, GS) for instance, had attained the grade point average necessary to pursue the university degree of her desire, but still felt that she needed to exert a lot of effort in achieving at a high level, as this looked better at the school-leaving certificate. There is an achievement standard among the pupils, Eva (18, GS) explained: *“I feel like grade 3 or 4 is labelled as a poor performance – not by the teachers, but by us pupils. If you don’t achieve grade 5 or 6 you’ve done poorly. That’s become the standard”*. Achieving the highest possible mark was perceived as a sign of true success, while grade 5 was somewhat acceptable. Susanne (18, GS) lost her motivation in her favourite subject, because she went from grade 6 to grade 5. Although these girls agreed that ‘your best’ was good enough, their best was only good if it resulted in one of the highest possible marks. As expressed by Trine (18, GS), *“To be 100% satisfied with myself, I need to do everything in my power, and use all my energy on it, and receive grade 5 or 6”*. Still, the final grade was more important than the effort exerted, *“If I don’t get that, I feel like it’s not a good accomplishment”*. Thus, the school achievement was only satisfactory if it upheld this high standard of reference. Only two informants from the general studies program expressed a lower aspiration level, and Caroline (18, GS) was satisfied with everything above grade 3: *“I don’t want to expect grade 5 or 6, as this only happens at rare occasions”*.

The majority in the vocational education programs viewed grade 3 or 4 as a yardstick separating a good achievement from a bad one, and expressed a lower grade standard compared to the pupils in general studies. A couple of vocational program girls expressed a higher performance standard compared to the majority in the same educational program, as demonstrated by Miriam (18, VP), *“Grade 5 or 6 is satisfactory. I’ve never attained anything below that”*. The vocational program boys appeared most relaxed in living up to standards, and Sindre (18, VP) was satisfied as long as he passed all his subjects. In general, the vocational program boys were more concerned with the final product they delivered, its functionality and appearance, than the grade achieved.

Although the majority had a certain grade standard they wanted to uphold, what was deemed as ‘good’ and ‘acceptable’ differed according to their own aspiration level, with the high-performers being under the greatest strain. The high-performance mentality was most prevalent among the girls in general studies, and being the best appeared to be closely related to the fear of being average.

The fear of mediocrity. Not being the best was perceived as a sign of weakness, and one of the biggest fears among the high-achieving girls in general studies was being labelled as mediocre. Vilde (18, GS) said it was shameful and embarrassing to receive a bad grade, as she *“want to stay on top. Like, I don’t want to show myself at my weakest”*. For Trine (18, GS), it was important to perform better than everyone else. *“It’s very disappointing when I’m not one of the best, that I’m sort of mediocre”*, and she feared not standing out as *“it’s the worst, being like, somewhere in the middle”*. This fear of being average seemed to be distinctive for the high-achieving girls, and at school they had the opportunity to prosper and experience mastery. Trine (18, GS) for instance, felt that she was not that popular and engaged in social activities outside school, so she needed to exert effort in other arenas: *“Where I perform is at school and in sports. It’s the two things I do, it’s like who I am”*. For her, school was a place where she could excel, but the pressure to succeed was also higher, as being good at school was a defining characteristic of who she is. Like Trine, several other female academic program pupils described how the grades achieved was an integral part of who they are as a person, as demonstrated in this account by Hege (18, GS): *“I feel that it [school] is important to me. I think I define myself too much on the basis of my grades”*.

Only two informants from the vocational programs shared the fear of not being good enough, but for Johan (17, VP) this was mainly in relation to the marks he achieved in vocational subjects, as this was where his interest and competence lied. After an assessment he could think, *“What if I’m not good enough? What if I did really poorly?”*. For Ida (17, VP), high marks were central in proving her ability and demonstrate to others that she was competent.

These accounts demonstrate how some of the informants viewed the marks achieved as a yardstick for their competence and self-worth. This was especially detrimental for the ones who only viewed marks in the upper echelon of the scale as acceptable.

Maintaining an identity as a high-achiever. For many of the girls who have always performed at a high level, being a high-performing pupil was claimed to be part of their identity. As Trine (18, GS) pointed out, *“Doing well at school is part of the role I have”*. Eva (18, GS) felt the same way and said, *“I have acquired an attitude demanding that I always perform. If I receive a grade 4 on a test, I get a stomach ache and think “Oh no!””*. Maintaining a high-performer identity was stressful, but keeping the label as a clever and achieving girl was important to them. Trine (18, GS) for instance, described how she did not want to disappoint herself, or to be perceived differently by others, and said *“It’s not fun to*

say that you've received a grade 3 on a test when everyone expects you to get a 6 (...) I've had this role since primary school, it's always been a thing". As her role was to be a high achiever, the risk of 'failure' was also more detrimental. She explained it like this:

"You really disappoint yourself as you go in with such high expectations (...) One put a lot of pressure on oneself, making the disappointment much greater than if you already expect that you'll perform poorly."

When a positive self-concept is dependent on an individual's academic achievements, a bad grade can result in failure to live up to this ideal, and the individual may suffer loss in self-esteem. Although the high-performing girls never experienced performing below grade 4, they seemed to believe that a bad grade could ruin their life. Identity entails both stability and continuity (Bosma, as cited in Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2013, p. 87), and when you identify as a high-achiever you need to uphold to this standard to preserve yourself. Although some of the girls realized that attaining grade 6 in every subject was unrealistic and aiming too high, they expressed difficulties in breaking the pattern. As pointed out by Trine (18, GS), *"I need to try to accept that it's ok to be ordinary and mediocre now and then"*. In sum, it appears to be a close connection between school accomplishments and identity, and the fear of failure and shame.

Christian (24, VP) had actually experienced going from an average GPA, to obtaining the highest possible mark in several of his subjects. Although his experience differed from the aforementioned girls, he shared their desire of maintaining this performance level, and explained how doing so became essential for him:

"I felt it became tiring, because I always had to make sure to obtain grade 6 (...). I needed to work extra, to be absolutely sure that it resulted in the highest possible mark, instead of just working with it [school] and doing well."

However, he realized later on that the stress of performing at a high level was not worth it in the end, and the following year he lowered his standards. As he previously had obtained lower grades, and his performance peak happened in upper secondary school, the grades may not be so intertwined with his identity. This might have made it easier for him to lower his standards, compared to the girls who had been high-performers ever since primary or secondary school.

Discussion. When asked what it entails to be good at school and do well, the pupils' accounts usually centred on grades and performance standards. Stress relating to marks appears to increase in accordance with aspiration level, with the high-achievers being under most duress. As seen in the previous section, for the majority of the informants, good grades

at school was related to the desire of securing future occupation. Although the high-aspiration level among the pupils can be justified to some extent on the basis of their desire to attain a prestigious job and a good future, this explanation is not adequate in illuminating why the internal pressure to excel and being the best was more prominent among the girls, especially the ones attending general studies.

One possible mechanism behind the girls' fear of being 'average' is that they may have a higher performance-based self-esteem compared to boys, as demonstrated in the study by Schraml et al. (2011). Maintaining an identity as a high-achiever, and keeping the label as a smart and good girl, was deemed important for several of the female informants. For some, the school arena is a place where they can prosper, and perform above average. As portrayed by Trine (GS), school and sports were the areas where she felt mastery, and thus prioritized above other things. However, if your self-worth is contingent on your accomplishments, this high ambition level can be problematic (Blom, 2012). In the literature, this is referred to as a performance-based self-esteem, characterised by self-definitional roles where you strive to validate self-worth by achievements within self-investing domains (Blom, 2012; Svedberg, Hallsten, Narusyte, Bodin, & Blom, 2016). Stress develops as a result of one's self-worth being endangered by the risk of failure, as not succeeding is equivalent with not being good enough, implying that you need to exert maximum effort and prove your competence in order to feel worthy (Schraml, 2013; Svedberg et al., 2016).

A self-esteem contingent on external sources such as marks implies that an individual's self-esteem can fluctuate dependent on the circumstances, making him or her more vulnerable to environmental changes (Schraml, 2013), which in turn is linked to negative health outcomes (Blom, 2012). For some of the informants, a bad grade can impose feelings of shame and embarrassment, as being studious and obtaining high marks was a defining character of their role at school. It appears that the more salient the role-identification as a highflier is, the more threatening it becomes to obtain low marks. According to the self-worth theory of achievement motivation, high effort leads to the greatest pupil shame and distress because of the implications for low ability (Covington, 1984). Exerting a lot of effort in schoolwork is followed by the threat of humiliation should the individual try hard and fail anyway. As such, the high-achieving pupils have more to lose should they under-perform.

Based on the pupils' accounts it appears that the individual aspiration level is set in the light of previous experiences, as demonstrated by the contrasting accounts by Miriam (VP) and Caroline (GS). For Miriam, grade 5 or 6 was the only acceptable alternative, as she had

never obtained anything below this. For Caroline, anything above grade 3 was satisfactory, as she knew based on previous experiences that receiving marks in the upper echelon for her was rare. However, how intertwined this performance-standard is with the individual's identity appears to be dependent on how early on they start to perform at a high level, as portrayed by Trine (GS) and Christian (VP). For Trine, the role-identification of being a high-performer was shaped early on and a role that was personally valued to a larger degree, compared to Christian who lowered his standards despite his high-performance the previous year. The fact that being a high-achiever was more common among girls than boys in this study is not that surprising, as girls on average graduate with higher GPA compared to boys on the school-leaving certificate (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017b).

The consensus view among scholars, seems to be that the high demands girls inflict on themselves, is a result of individualization, and an internalization of the 'girls can do anything'-belief (Harris, 2004; Östberg et al., 2015). In the study by Wiklund and Bengs (2012), girls actually claimed they must work harder, compared to the boys, in order to be acknowledged and visible. This was accompanied by a feeling of never being good enough, pushing them to work even harder (Wiklund & Bengs, 2012). Consequently, the gender pattern in aspiration level may be a result of different societal influences. For boys, the seemingly more relaxed approach to school and performance standards are in line with the dominant discourse of masculinity, where orientation toward schoolwork is not a defining characteristic (Francis et al., 2012, p. 100). According to Phoenix (2004), adolescent boys employ different self-worth protecting strategies to avoid harassment for not living up to the masculine ideal. One plausible strategy is rejecting schoolwork, or standing on a middle ground between being too academic or failing, and thereby experiencing less school-related pressure (Landstedt & Gådin, 2012; Phoenix, 2004).

Although there was a clear gender gap in aspiration levels in this study, the internal pressure to excel was less salient among the vocational program pupils independent of gender, reflected in the lower grade standards reported. This trend is also mirrored in national statistics, as it is more common that pupils with a lower GPA from secondary school apply for vocational programs, compared to general studies (SSB, 2013). Although the vocational program pupils were invested in their future, they appeared to place less value on marks as an important determinant for self-conception and worth. As discussed in the preceding theme, the vocational program pupils prioritized vocational subjects. This may be because these are the subjects where their competence and opportunity for mastery lies, and for Johan (VP) the

marks in these subjects were important for his self-view. The fact that vocational program pupils were more relaxed in living up to performance standards may to some extent be related to social class, as the pressure to perform is more eminent among middle-class pupils, compared to working-class pupils (West & Sweeting, 2003).

In sum, it appears that the more important school feels like, and the greater the role-identification of being a high-achiever, the more threatening and stress-evoking school performance measures become. According to the transactional theory of stress, the stressors' meaning to the individual shape appraisal, and stressors of personal value evoke stronger stress responses as they are experienced as more threatening to the person's self (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). While performing at a high-level was common among the interviewed pupils in general studies, this performance level was less pronounced among the vocational program pupils. Corroborating the study by Landstedt & Gådin (2012), the vocational program boys was seemingly most relaxed in living up to high grade standards.

Theme 4: Coping with Imposing Demands

The understanding of stress at school and the consequences for health and wellbeing is incomplete without considering how the pupils actually cope with these types of stressors (Murberg & Bru, 2005). In this section we will consider the coping mechanisms employed by the pupils in dealing with school stress. The experience of stress is not harmful per se, but the inability to cope can make a big difference in adaptation outcome (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Distraction. When asked specifically what they do to reduce feelings of stress, one of the most common strategies reported was to *“just put it aside for a while – just do whatever”*, like Elise (18, GS) described it. This applied for all informants, independent of gender and educational program. A variety of approaches were mentioned, and ‘doing whatever’ entailed activities such as listening to music, watching TV, sleeping, taking a walk, and seeing friends. Johan (17, VP) described how watching a movie was helpful because it made him feel like he could travel to another place *“where my problems don’t exist. Where my thoughts don’t exist”*. Taken together, this indicated that the majority of the pupils dealt with stress by taking a break from it all, not approaching their problems in a strategic and efficient way.

Planning and prioritizing. Although distraction was a common way to deal with imposing demands, the informants also mentioned more active coping strategies like planning

and prioritizing. As pointed out by Miriam (18, VP), poor time management can explain why some of the pupils experienced the schoolwork as overwhelming: *“When my classmates say they have too much to do, I think it’s only because they don’t spend their time well”*. In order to cope with the amount of schoolwork, several pupils relied on good planning, prioritizing school and the most important assessments, and spent the allocated time in class to work on assignments and projects efficiently. The academic program pupils seemed to be more reliant on these problem-oriented coping strategies, and described a greater course load, compared to their vocational program counterparts. A couple of the girls from general studies talked about how their mind made them think that they had more to do than what they actually did. Like Trine (18, GS) said, *“It’s like you have a thousand things to do, but in reality it’s only three”*. In order to minimize the stress caused by this irrational thought pattern, focusing on one task at a time, and making lists on what to prioritize was experienced as helpful.

Despite their knowledge of the potential benefits, almost half of the informants expressed difficulties with implementing these techniques. Procrastination was a common phenomenon among all the informants, such as watching Netflix and goofing around with friends at school instead of focusing on their schoolwork. This procrastination of schoolwork resulted in late night studying, working with school tasks during the weekends, and finishing assignments last minute. Vilde (18, GS) for instance, described how she regretted not working more consistently throughout the year and getting a head start on the assigned schoolwork, to avoid an all-out effort and accumulation of work towards the end. Several girls from general studies recognized that the stress related to time constraints sometimes was a consequence of their own deficient planning and prioritizing, while their vocational counterparts often explained it solely as a result of too much schoolwork.

Protective mechanisms. The informants also dealt with school stress and performance pressure by utilizing self-protecting strategies. For instance, by attributing a bad grade to an external cause such as an excessive course load, time pressure, or the teachers. Trine (18, GS) was the only one who explicitly used the word “excuse” in her description of this particular strategy. Saying, *“I got a 3, but I didn’t study for it. It wasn’t that important”* was helpful, as telling your friends that you did not suffice was experienced as embarrassing.

A few girls from general studies blamed the teacher if they got an unexpected grade. *“When that happens we just say “well yes, but the teacher is so strict” and stuff like that (...) or we often talk about it if everyone gets a bad mark – like, then it’s the teacher’s fault”* (Lotte, 18, GS). Not having a sense of being alone was helpful, especially by emphasizing the

teachers' responsibility for the pupils' setbacks. As Hege (18, GS) implied, *"If everyone do poorly, it can't be me there's something wrong with. It has to be the teacher"*. This strategy appeared to be less common among the vocational pupils. Although some blamed the teachers for excessive course loads and time pressure, Jeanette (17, VP) was the only one who blamed a bad grade as a result of this.

Another self-protecting strategy the adolescents applied, was attempting to convince themselves that *"it's not the end of the world"* (Lotte, 18, GS). This was especially common among the high-achieving girls attending general studies. *"I kind of just try to belittle things for myself (...) and try to minimize it a bit (...) I just pretend that it doesn't really matter. Convince myself that it's not really that important"*, Trine (18, GS) said. Likewise, some of her female classmates also talked about how they attempted to take on a different perspective, and tried to convince themselves that *"It's just a grade. I'll get an education no matter what"* (Lotte, 18, GS). Elise (18, GS) explained how it came to the point where she did not manage the stress anymore, and said that she eventually *"Just didn't give a damn"*. Although it reduced the stress for a while, some of the girls recognized the risk of utilizing this strategy, as Trine (18, GS) pointed out, *"It's a bit stupid as well, because the performance decrease when you don't think it's important – if you don't try your best"*. Thus, there seemed to be some ambivalence attached to this strategy, due to the risk of under-performing by not prioritizing their schoolwork. By belittling the consequences, they could pretend for a while that school was not that important, and thereby reduce stress and protect their self-worth.

In resemblance with the girls from general studies, Jeanette (17, VP) said, *"Sometimes I just give up and forget about it, although I can't really forget it. But in the end I just accept the consequences, and just don't care for a little while"*. Johan (17, VP) also acknowledged that education is important and it was always in the back of his mind. However, he tried to enjoy his spare time and put less pressure on himself to obtain good grades. In general, telling themselves that receiving a bad mark is not the end of the world was not a common coping strategy among pupils attending the vocational education programs, but as pointed out in the previous section, vocational pupils seemed less obsessed by their grades.

Social support. For most of the informants, receiving emotional support was perceived as helpful. The majority of the adolescents said that they felt supported and encouraged by their parents, as they only expected them to do their best, and told them *"Don't stress so much. It's going to be fine. You're doing well at school"* (Hege, 18, GS). Although about half of the informants did not discuss school with their parents, the remaining

pupils actively sought out help and talked with family and friends during stressful times. Like Sunniva (18, GS) said, *“It often helps to talk about things. And if you get really stressed out, it can be helpful as you vent all the emotions that make you stressed out, and you become calmer”*. Another example was Miriam (18, VP), who said she phone ‘terrorized’ her family until someone picked up. Her family members then reminded her to take some time off, and allowed her to think about something besides school, and afterwards she felt much better.

Several girls, independent of study program, talked about the relief and reassurance of ‘being in the same boat’ as their peers. Finding support in friends in the same situation was helpful, especially if someone was as unprepared for a test as they were themselves. *“That’s like the best answer you could get, that “I haven’t studied either”. It actually helps more than you think. Like, that we do badly together, sort of”* (Lotte, 18, GS).

Getting praise from the teachers was also highly valued, and several pupils from all educational programs said that supportive and understanding teachers were very helpful. They also appreciated teachers who communicated well with their pupils, and with each other. However, Trine (18, GS) wished that the teachers would prepare the pupils for personal setbacks, and wanted them to push the pupils to make more mistakes, by *“telling us that we need to learn from our mistakes”*. By doing this *“it wouldn’t be that constant pressure about always being perfect all the time”*, she said.

Receiving instrumental support was also valued, and some girls expressed feelings of relief when parents were considerate by letting them skip chores at home, giving them time to concentrate on their schoolwork. About half of the pupils also asked parents or classmates for academic help when practicing for a test or working on a project. However, the teachers were most influential in reducing pupils’ stress levels through instrumental support. For the pupils in general studies, permission to work with school assignments during school hours was helpful, while their vocational counterparts appreciated practical help in finishing their projects on time. Several informants from both educational programs also mentioned constructive feedback, pupil participation, help in prioritizing schoolwork, alternative forms of assessment, adjustment and adapted education, as helpful in coping with school demands.

Discussion. Coping competence is a key component in fostering successful transition from adolescence to adulthood, and has been shown to have a mediating effect between stress and adaptation (Eppelmann et al., 2016). During adolescence, there is an increase in the repertoire of coping strategies utilized (Zimmer-Gimbeck & Skinner, 2011), and in our study several coping strategies were mentioned. Internal coping was commonly employed, such as

anticipation of worst case or making compromises (Eppelmann et al., 2016). The adolescents also used different forms of active coping, where they approach the problem, such as seeking out advice or emotional support. A more maladaptive strategy is withdrawal from the stressor, where you avoid the problematic situation or emotions, such as resignation (Eppelmann et al., 2016). This was less common among the informants, although some mentioned the strategy of “*not giving a damn*”.

Mental disengagement by means of behavioral distraction was used by several of the informants, including efforts to do something else in order to avoid thinking about the problem, or just relax for a while. Taking a break from it all can be an efficient mean to relax and restore energy, as it entails a temporary withdrawal, where demands and pressure are shut off for a while and replaced by other activities (Eriksen et al., 2017, p. 56). Although this strategy is not directed at the problem in itself, it is shown to be effective in dealing with uncontrollable stressors or manage emotions, and is a common strategy among adolescents (Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2011). However, to actually deal with the difficulties at school, more active coping is called for.

Utilizing planning and prioritizing is a problem-oriented coping strategy (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which appeared to be distinctive for the pupils in general studies. In accordance with previous research (Eriksen et al., 2017, p. 102), they gave the impression that they had the power to change their situation by being more efficient, and applying specific strategies and techniques in order to cope. They expressed a ‘this is how it is’-mentality, and an understanding of stress as a consequence of own deficient planning or prioritizing. In contrast, most of the girls attending the vocational programs viewed stress as more extrinsically caused, and shifted the blame towards the teachers for not understanding and giving them too much to do. Whereas working with school assessments at home was part of the academic pupils’ everyday-life, the vocational pupils were more accustomed to finish their assessments and projects during school hours. This may explain why they blame their teachers in periods where working at home is necessary, as it deviates from what they normally do.

Applying self-protecting strategies such as blaming a bad grade on insufficient studying or the teachers, was common among the academic program girls. According to Covington (1984), humans are motivated to uphold a positive self-view, and employ self-protecting mechanisms when the self is threatened. Making up excuses in the school setting is not uncommon, such as claiming to be unprepared for a test beforehand. By doing this they

have a justification if they under-perform, and are able to explain the causes of failure to an external source outside their control (Covington, 1984). Making up excuses and extrinsic explanations for own possible setbacks is better than admitting own shortcomings, as disclosing that they do not suffice is embarrassing and an indication of being a bad person. By doing this, the high-achieving girls protect themselves and their own abilities, as the potential setback is caused and explained by making a deliberate choice. Despite the frequent use of these protective strategies, they had an understanding that this was not the optimal form of coping, as it could result in a bad grade by deprioritizing their schoolwork. Employing these strategies lead to the very failures that these pupils are trying to avoid, but in a sense these are failures with honor as it do not imply low academic ability, and consequently is not a true measure of the pupil's academic worth (Covington, 1984). Although they were trying to convince themselves that a bad grade is not the end of the world, the reminder of success at school as a prerequisite for a bright future seemed hard to shake.

These self-protecting strategies were less common among the boys and the vocational pupils. Although they blamed the teachers for giving them too much schoolwork, causing time pressure and stress, blaming them for a bad test result was rare. This may be due to the fact that the high-achieving girls in general studies are more personally invested and place higher value on their achievements, as discussed in the previous section, compared to the vocational pupils. If the individual's self-worth is dependent on his or her accomplishments, he or she has more to gain by employing these types of self-protecting strategies.

Support-seeking is a coping strategy commonly employed among children and adolescents (Zimmer-Gimbeck & Skinner, 2011; Persike & Seiffge-Krenke, 2012), but is only efficient to the extent that the resource is utilized (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 259). Although seeking out social support is shown to be more common among girls (Gelhaar et al., 2007; Persike & Seiffge-Krenke, 2012), this was the only coping strategy where several boys were represented in this study, and a strategy that was used by the majority of the informants. Although most of the pupils felt supported by family and friends, carrying out conversations about school was uncommon. For some, parents and friends was helpful in venting frustration and emotions, while teachers were portrayed as able to reduce feelings of stress through concrete actions and measures, and appear to be one of the most important actors.

In line with previous research, female adolescents utilized coping strategies to a higher degree, compared to boys, when facing the same perceived stressors (Persike & Seiffge-Krenke, 2012). In our interviews, boys were principally represented in the active coping

strategy of seeking help and social support. The girls, especially the high-achievers, also relied on internal coping, and perceived a personal responsibility in attaining useful coping strategies. Due to advances in cognitive thinking, coping becomes more self-reliant in adolescence (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2012), and many of the deployed strategies among the girls were directed inward at the self. The potential for utilizing meta-cognitive strategies when approaching challenges, also result in higher-order coping where the long-term effects of an action course is taken into account. Although this can increase the effectiveness of coping beyond the present episode, imagining the long-term consequences can lead to worrying about the future, picturing worst-case scenarios (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2012). This consequence thinking appears to be more prevalent among the female informants, as discussed in the first section of our findings, and may explain why girls ruminated more and employed more dysfunctional coping.

In accordance with previous research, more emotion-oriented and dysfunctional coping was used in dealing with school demands (Seiffge-Krenke, 1995, p. 121). This is not surprising, as the informants experienced great responsibility and pressure at school in combination with little control, with the high-achieving girls experiencing the highest levels of threat. As the pupils cannot change the actual controllability of school demands, they cope by minimizing the importance of school or pressure themselves to work even harder. This fits well with the individualistic idea, rendering the pupils responsible for their learning (Phoenix, 2004).

4. Concluding Remarks and Implications

The present study targeted the concept of school stress by means of in-depth individual interviews, and explored the differences in the informants' stress experiences, analytically foregrounding gender and educational program. In analyzing the empirical material, it became apparent that adolescents attending their final year of upper secondary school in Norway experienced both short-term and long-term stressors at school, such as heavy workload, time pressure, comparing test results, fulfilling own and others' expectations, and striving to excel. The pupils' stories bare witness of how the role of perceived expectations and performance demands impacted the stress experience, and receiving good grades was portrayed as the most significant concern. Grades had an all-consuming effect on the informants' lives with its vitality for securing a good future. In managing the imposing demands at school, a variety of coping strategies were utilized, but

social and instrumental support from the teachers was highlighted as most important. While individual differences in stress experiences existed, the major general stressors reported were not exclusive to one group of pupils.

The findings were summarized by four interconnected main themes. Not overcoming the daily hassles, such as time constraints and fulfilling teachers' expectations, have long-term consequences for the informants, as not attaining the desired grades entail putting their future at stake. What is deemed as a prosperous future is closely related to parental and societal expectations, but fulfilling these expectations is a personal responsibility imposed on each pupil, as they need to make the right life-decisions before graduating upper secondary school. To the extent that these demands are internalized, the more stress is experienced due to high aspiration levels and the threat of personal failure. As a consequence, efficient coping strategies become vital in order to relieve stress and focus on what is important. The more internal expectations the pupils pose on themselves, the more internal coping strategies are necessary in order to cope. Taken together, this indicates that grades are not only threatening to their present self, but also to their future self and the person they want to become. Both present and future success is dependent on achieving the desired grades, as there is a fine line between success and failure, and being the best and being mediocre, underscoring the all-or-nothing thought pattern that is so pervasive among the informants.

Although we are unable to explain the prevalent gender gap in psychological health complaints among Norwegian adolescents, the findings point to how the importance of achievement, grades, and hard work may explain the higher stress levels among girls. However, we see that vocational program girls experienced school as less demanding and all-consuming than their female academic counterparts, highlighting the importance of including educational program as an aspect of analysis. Pupils in general studies appeared more stressed over school compared to vocational program pupils, but the findings are limited as only one academic program boy took part in the research project. Our findings suggest that the level of experienced school stress depend on variations in aspiration levels, perceived expectations, the understanding of grades' importance for the informants' life (both now and in the future), and subsequent coping. Grades become more important for those planning a university education, those with an uncertain future, and those having a self-worth contingent on the achieved grades. Compared to the rest of the sample, the high-achieving girls were over-represented in all the categories above.

From a methodological point of view, some specifics of the sample need to be considered. Selection bias is a potential concern due to the nature of self-recruitment, and the research topic may have attracted mainly stressed out pupils. The number of male informants in the final sample was limited, and thus may confine our understanding of adolescent boys' stress experiences. Moreover, it is possible that the participating boys were 'atypical', as the research topic appealed more to girls in general. Background measures such as socioeconomic status and ethnicity were not considered, and should be addressed in future research. Still, the research project makes important contributions to the literature through increased understanding and awareness of school-related stress based on accounts from the target group, including both male and female pupils attending different educational programs, from two different schools. Besides making it possible to conduct a substantial number of interviews, being two researchers has been an obvious strength in regards to critical assessment, interpretation, and triangulation of the empirical material.

The findings from the present study demonstrate how academic achievement and future life goals pose challenges for the adolescents at school, and point to the need of increased attentiveness among teachers and parents about the role of internal and external demands in the experience of school stress. Although school effort is valuable for future prospects, the internalization of high-achievement attitudes can be detrimental, as school becomes the only priority in this life-phase (Östberg et al., 2015). The experience of performance pressure at school is associated with depressed mood, lower self-worth and exhaustion among Norwegian pupils in lower and upper secondary school (Skaalvik & Federici, 2015), making it essential to focus attention towards the reasons behind this performance pressure. The pupils' accounts reflect signals from parents, society, and school, where performance is emphasized, while individual progress seems to be neglected, making ability a criterion for self-worth (Skaalvik & Federici, 2015). As pressure from society is difficult to change through simple interventions, we argue that the school arena has great potential in ameliorating pupils' stress levels by improving the learning environment.

To reverse the prevalent performance trend, the results suggest that an alteration in the school goal structure may be beneficial, moving from a performance based structure by increasing attention on learning for the sake of learning. This may be achieved by measuring success at school by progress, development, and individual goal attainment (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2013, p. 200). To promote a learning-oriented goal structure, the focus should be on improvement, mastering, and accepting mistakes as part of the learning-process. The primary

goal is to increase task-oriented motivation, instead of seeing grades and performance as the sole motivation and reward (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2013, p. 201). As seen in this study, grades were the sole determinant of success, and attaining the right grade was far more important than learning something.

Reflections from the target group imply that alternative assessments, teacher flexibility, equal attention to all pupils, adapted teaching, teacher support, and explicit clarification of teachers' expectations are relevant focus areas in creating a beneficial school climate. At school, teachers determine what is considered good and right, and to minimize the grade obsession among the pupils, more informal feedback in the form of encouragement, praise, and guidance may be helpful (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2013, p. 203). Only receiving formal feedback through test results focus pupils' attributions towards ability and enhance social comparison. By clarifying expectations for behaviour and academic work, the pupils may feel safer in the learning context, as they know what is expected of them in a given context. This also entails specifying the what, when, how, and how much work a given task requires (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2013, p. 219-221). Teachers obviously play a key role in supporting adolescents' success at school through instrumental and social support, but for these recommendations to be feasible, teachers are reliant on encouragement and support in the classroom.

The majority of the pupils expressed absence of control over their school day, in combination with high demands, placing them at risk for psychological strain and physical illness (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). To redeem control, the school should provide the opportunity for pupils to exert influence, and the participants highlighted increased co-determination as important to improve their school day. More democratic school climates, where pupils engage in decision-making about structural issues have proved beneficial, as teachers and rules are perceived as more justifiable (Vieno, Perkins, Smith, & Santinello, 2005). Providing autonomy-support through co-determination may foster task-orientation, intrinsic motivation, and effort among the pupils, and diminish external control and negative stress (Weinstein & Ryan, 2011). Increased control over the school day may also invite to more problem-oriented coping strategies, as the pupils have more power in influencing the controllability of school demands.

This study has contributed to an increased understanding of what stress-evoking factors that are prevalent at school, and suggestions to optimize the school day for Norwegian pupils. Future investigations would benefit from a deeper focus on boys' stress experiences,

especially academic program boys, as this sample comprised of only one boy from general studies. This is important as their experience may highlight what factors that are mutual among pupils attending general studies, and what is more specific for girls only. To get a better understanding of individual differences in stress experiences at school, more attention needs to be drawn to socioeconomic background and ethnicity, as these factors may contribute to differences in choice of educational program, achievement levels, and parental aspirations. As the pupils with a role-identification as a high-achiever were under the greatest strain, the impact of stressors on perception of identity salience needs further examination. The present study was conducted in the eastern part of southern Norway, and additional studies in other parts of the country is necessary in order to investigate the patterns in school-induced stress among Norwegian adolescents, as specific characteristics in this sample may not be applicable to pupils in other regions of the country.

The present study makes a contribution to the literature by being one of the first to explore stress at school among Norwegian adolescents from different educational programs, highlighting future plans, ambition level, and expectations as important determinants influencing pupils' stress levels and subsequent coping. The high-achieving girls appear to have internalized the demands posed by society to the greatest extent, and their inability to distance themselves from these imposing demands may be a contributing factor in their stress reaction. To improve the everyday life of Norwegian adolescents, it is important to provide support and tools to enhance harmony in life, to avoid school becoming all-consuming. Finding the optimal balance between the workload, the allocated time to complete it, and the pupils' capacity to utilize control over own work, are important aspects that the schools should consider in order to reduce stress levels among Norwegian adolescents. This can be a step in the right direction in providing adolescents with optimal preconditions for their future life, and maintenance of good health and wellbeing.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Rammesetting (før intervjuet starter):

- Presenter deg selv og prosjektet
 - o Bakgrunn og formål for samtalen
 - o Forklar hva intervjuet skal brukes til
- Forsikre anonymitet og konfidensialitet. Avklar eventuelle spørsmål.
- Frivillig å svare på spørsmål. Informanten er i sin fulle rett til å avstå fra å svare på enkeltspørsmål, og kan avslutte intervjuet når vedkommende måtte føle for det.
- Gi informanten samtykkeerklæring til undertegnelse. Fortell at denne erklæringen ikke skal oppbevares sammen med intervjuet, og på et sikkert sted.
- Informer om lydopptak, og sørg for samtykke til opptak.
- Spør om informanten har noen spørsmål eller om noe er uklart.

Oppfølging av relevante fortellinger/narrativer:

- Følg opp historiene med tanke på detaljer og tidsperioder, ved å følge narrativet kronologisk.
- Følg opp tankerekken til respondenten. Intervjuer kan gjenta de viktige ordene i et svar - invitere til fordypning
- Oppfølgingsspørsmål:
 - Kan du si noe mer om det?
 - Kan du gi en mer detaljert beskrivelse av det som skjedde?
 - Har du flere eksempler på dette?
 - Hva gjorde du..?
 - Hva tenker du om..?
 - Hvordan opplevde du..?

SOSIAL BAKGRUNN OG SKOLEHVERDAG

Spørsmål
Kan du først fortelle meg litt om deg selv, hvor gammel du er, har du søsken, hvem bor du sammen med, hva jobber foreldrene dine med?
Kan du fortelle meg om hva du liker å gjøre på fritiden? (Hobbyer, interesser, jobb, trening osv).

FORSTÅElsen AV BEGREPENE STRESS OG PRESS

Spørsmål
Hvordan vil du definere begrepet stress?
Hvordan føles det å være stresset?
Hvordan vil du definere begrepet press?

SKOLESTRESS OG PRESS

Spørsmål
Kan du tenke tilbake på en situasjon eller periode på skolen hvor du følte deg stresset, og fortelle meg om den?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hvordan opplevde du det?• Hvordan reagerte kroppen din?• Gjorde du noe for å føle deg mindre stresset?• Har du flere eksempler på dette? (skolestress, nyere tid)
Hvor ofte føler du deg stresset grunnet noe som har med skolen å gjøre?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hva på skolen oppleves som mest stressende?
Kan du fortelle litt om hvordan klassekameratene dine påvirker deg når du er stresset over ting på skolen?
Kan du fortelle litt om hvordan lærerne dine påvirker deg når du er stresset over ting på skolen?
Kan du fortelle litt om hvordan foreldrene dine påvirker deg når du er stresset over ting på skolen?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Er det noe (aktør) gjør som får deg til å føle deg mindre stresset?</i>• <i>Er det noe (aktør) gjør som får deg til å føle deg mer stresset?</i>

PRESTASJENSORIENTERING, AMBISJONSNIVÅ

Spørsmål
Kan du fortelle meg om hva det vil si ”å gjøre det bra på skolen” for deg?
Føler du noe press på å gjøre det bra på skolen? (Hvis ja: hvor kommer presset fra?)
Hvordan opplever du det å få karakterer på skolen?
Er karakterer viktig for deg? (Hvis ja: Hvorfor?)
Hva tenker du om hvordan klassekameratene dine gjør det på skolen?

STUDIEPROGRAM OG PLANER FOR FREMTIDEN

Spørsmål
Hvorfor valgte du dette studieprogrammet?
Hvilke planer eller ønsker har du for fremtiden?

Avslutning:

- «Er det noe du har tenkt på nå som vi har snakket sammen, som jeg ikke har spurt deg om, som du tenker er viktig i denne sammenhengen?»
- Oppsummer muntlig og gå gjennom de viktigste punktene som kom frem i løpet av intervjuet.
- Avklare misforståelser, spørre om man har forstått riktig dersom noe er uklart.
- «Tusen takk for at du stilte opp til intervju»

Appendix B: NSD Approval



Bente Træen
Postboks 1094 Blindern
0317 OSLO

Vår dato: 04.08.2017

Vår ref: 54563 / 3 / LAR

Deres dato:

Deres ref:

Tilbakemelding på melding om behandling av personopplysninger

Vi viser til melding om behandling av personopplysninger, mottatt 29.05.2017.

Meldingen gjelder prosjektet:

<i>54563</i>	<i>Skolerelatert stress og press blant unge jenter: En kvalitativ studie om studenters opplevelse av stressorer tilknyttet skole</i>
<i>Behandlingsansvarlig</i>	<i>Universitetet i Oslo, ved institusjonens øverste leder</i>
<i>Daglig ansvarlig</i>	<i>Bente Træen</i>
<i>Student</i>	<i>Monica Johansen</i>

Personvernombudet har vurdert prosjektet, og finner at behandlingen av personopplysninger vil være regulert av § 7-27 i personopplysningsforskriften. Personvernombudet tilrår at prosjektet gjennomføres.

Personvernombudets tilråding forutsetter at prosjektet gjennomføres i tråd med opplysningene gitt i meldeskjemaet, korrespondanse med ombudet, ombudets kommentarer samt personopplysningsloven og helseregisterloven med forskrifter. Behandlingen av personopplysninger kan settes i gang.

Det gjøres oppmerksom på at det skal gis ny melding dersom behandlingen endres i forhold til de opplysninger som ligger til grunn for personvernombudets vurdering. Endringsmeldinger gis via et eget [skjema](#). Det skal også gis melding etter tre år dersom prosjektet fortsatt pågår. Meldinger skal skje skriftlig til ombudet.

Personvernombudet har lagt ut opplysninger om prosjektet i en [offentlig database](#).

Personvernombudet vil ved prosjektets avslutning, 31.05.2018, rette en henvendelse angående status for behandlingen av personopplysninger.

Dersom noe er uklart ta gjerne kontakt over telefon.

Vennlig hilsen

Katrine Utaaker Segadal Elektronisk produsert og godkjent ved NSDs rutiner for elektronisk godkjenning.

Forespørsel om deltakelse i forskningsprosjektet:

”Skolerelatert stress og press blant ungdom: En kvalitativ studie av elevers opplevelse av stressorer tilknyttet skolen”

Bakgrunn og hensikt med studien

Dette prosjektet blir gjennomført av to masterstudenter ved psykologisk institutt på universitetet i Oslo, som vil finne ut av hvordan ungdommer på videregående opplever stress som er knyttet til det å gå på skolen. Vi vil finne ut av hvilke situasjoner på skolen som gjør at ungdom blir stresset, og om det er noen forskjell mellom de som går yrkesfag og studiespesialisering. Hva gjør de når de blir stresset? Hvilken rolle spiller lærere og andre elever inn på opplevelsen av stress? Hvilke planer har ungdommen for fremtiden?

For å finne svaret på disse spørsmålene ønsker vi å intervjuere elever som går i 2. eller 3.klasse på videregående, både fra studiespesialisering og yrkesfag. Deltakerne har blitt valgt ut på bakgrunn av at de er i den ønskelige alderen og at de går på en skole som tilbyr både yrkesfag og studiespesialiserende. Vi er ikke ute etter å få svar som er ”riktig” eller ”feil”, men vil høre om dine tanker og erfaringer rundt temaene ovenfor. Alles erfaringer er like viktige for oss.

Hva innebærer studien?

Måten vi vil finne svaret på disse spørsmålene på er at vi vil gjøre intervjuer med elever som går på videregående. Vi vil stille spørsmål om tanker, følelser og erfaringer, sånn som spørsmålene nevnt ovenfor, men vi er også interessert i andre temaer du synes er viktig i denne sammenhengen. Hvis du har lyst til å bli intervjuet, vil det foregå en samtale mellom deg og en eller to masterstudenter. Ingen andre er til stede under intervjuet og vi vil sitte i et ledig rom på skolen. Samtalen tas opp på lydbånd. Når intervjuet er ferdig vil lydbåndet overføres til en ekstern harddisk. Intervjuet vil vare i ca. 1 time, avhengig av hvor mye du har lyst til å fortelle oss. Dette prosjektet har ingenting med skolen din å gjøre, og om du velger å delta eller ikke vil ikke påvirke din skolegang eller dine karakterer.

Hva vil skje med informasjonen om deg?

All personlig informasjon vil bli behandlet konfidensielt. Det betyr at det er ingen andre enn de to masterstudentene som får tilgang til informasjonen om deg (navnet ditt, hvilken skole du går på, osv.). Vi kommer til å ha en liste med personlig informasjon over de som har vært med på intervjuene, men denne listen vil låses inn, sånn at ingen andre kan se den. Det samme gjelder den eksterne harddisken med lydbåndet av intervjuet ditt. Den skriftlige versjonen av intervjuet vil lagres på datamaskinen vår, som er beskyttet med brukernavn og passord. Intervjuet ditt og det du forteller oss om deg selv skal bare brukes sånn som vi har forklart i hensikten med studien, og skal brukes i en masteroppgave. Navn, personnummer eller adresse kommer ikke til å bli skrevet ned i masteroppgaven. Vi kommer til å gi intervjuet med deg og samtykkeerklæringen din en kode. Det vil si at vi kaller deg for noe annet enn det du egentlig heter. Denne koden kommer heller ikke til å bli skrevet i masteroppgaven.

I masteroppgaven vi skal skrive vil det ikke gå an å gjenkjenne hvem som har sagt hva. Vi kommer ikke til å bruke navnet ditt eller si noe om deg som gjør det mulig for andre å skjønne hvem som har sagt det som står skrevet, så ingen kommer til å vite at det er du som har sagt det vi skriver. Alt du forteller om deg selv vil altså anonymiseres.

Ingen på skolen eller noen andre kommer til å få vite hva du forteller oss. Det er bare masterstudentene som jobber med prosjektet som kommer til å vite hvem som har sagt hva. Vi kommer ikke til å bruke det ordentlige navnet ditt noe sted.

Masteroppgaven skal være ferdig i mai 2018. Veilederen vår er ansvarlig for dataene ved prosjektslutt, og alle opplysningene om deg vil bli anonymisert eller slettet.

Frivillig deltakelse

Det er frivillig å delta i studien, og du kan når som helst velge å trekke deg. Du trenger ikke si hvorfor du ikke vil være med lenger. Hvis du bestemmer deg for å ikke være med likevel, vil all personlig informasjon om deg bli anonymisert.

Hvis du har lyst til å være med på studien, kan du signere samtykkeerklæringen på neste side. Dersom du har noen spørsmål kan du ta kontakt med en av masterstudentene:

Camilla T. Ellefsen: telefon 97 60 65 17, eller camillaellefsen@gmail.com

Monica Johansen: telefon 99 36 80 05, eller monicajohansen92@hotmail.com

Kontaktinformasjon veileder:

Bente Træen: telefon 22 84 51 78, eller bente.traen@psykologi.uio.no

Studien har blitt godkjent av Norsk Senter for Forskningsdata (NSD).