

## **FORMER PUPILS' EXPERIENCED MENTAL HEALTH (MH) AND QUALITY OF LIFE (QOL) SOME YEARS AFTER COMPLETION OF ADAPTED SECONDARY EDUCATION**

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**Abstract.** *The article addresses the following research question: Some years after having completed adapted secondary education, (a) how do former pupils assess their present status of MH and QoL, and (b) what aspects of the adapted education do they consider to have contributed positively to this status? The purpose of the study is to look for positive outcomes of adapted secondary education in pupils' adult life, regarding their MH and QoL in particular. The study may also contribute knowledge that may be relevant in reducing drop-out from secondary vocational schools. Data collection was done by interviewing nine former pupils, all from the same school. Their statements were analyzed by a combination of editing analysis and quantitative content analysis. Firstly, findings show that the informants' scored QoL of a similar level as found in other studies of the general Norwegian population. Presumably the MH is also similar. Secondly, the following aspects of the adapted secondary education are reported to contribute positively to this status: (1) The set of attitudes and relationship-building competence of the staff; (2) the good peer-milieu, and the efforts the staff invested in it; (3) the school's well-organized program for apprenticeship and possibilities of working practically; and (4) the latter plus the modes of teaching which made the pupils achieve a feeling of coping.*

**Keywords:** *Adapted secondary education, attitudes of staff, feeling of coping, mental health, peer-milieu, program for apprenticeship, quality of life, relationship-building competence.*

### **Introduction**

Ministers of Education in Norway have for years expressed their concern for the great number of pupils who fail to complete their secondary education in proper time. For instance, Kristin Halvorsen (Minister 2009-2013) stated in an interview: “Barely 55 % of those starting on a vocational training program complete it with a vocational document or a certificate of completed apprenticeship.” (Solhaugen, 2013). The heading of the article says that the drop-outs annually cost 7.5 billion NOK. Another Minister (during the 1990ies), and now researcher, Gudmund Hernes suggests 5 billion (Hernes, 2010). There seems to be a link between the drop-out status and later experienced condition of mental health (MH). Lunde (2013: 17) claims: “Young people between 16 and

*30 years, who neither have a job nor are involved in educating themselves, experience a poorer health status than their peers. One out of five is referred to a psychologist or psychiatrist, and many of them struggle with different symptoms and pains in their daily lives.*” In an editorial to a proposal from the present Minister of Education, Torbjørn Røe Isaksen, the author expresses (Editorial, 2<sup>nd</sup> Jan. 2015, p. 2): *“The drop-out-problem is a Gordian tangle.”* And he continues: *“When pupils explain why they experience the secondary school like an uphill-walk, loneliness and mental problems are among the most common reasons.”* These statements underpin the claim that there is a connection between the status of education offered at this level and the reported MH of the pupils, and that a high-quality secondary education might be a key-solution both for the individual and society.

The purpose of the study is to look for the impact of adapted vocational training on former pupils' later experienced MH and quality of life (QoL) some years after their completion of secondary education. The first author has been occupied with adapted education for marginalised teenagers since 2002 at a particular secondary school (in the following called VGS), which is run by a temperance society. He was challenged through his own work and his school-management to search for possible durable outcomes of the adapted training. Due to little former Norwegian research the second author challenged him to look for MH and QoL aspects.

### **From theme to research question**

Generally in special needs education there is a lack of longitudinal studies, both in Norway and in the Nordic countries (Dalen 2013). This also concerns direct research of the impact of adapted education on pupils' MH and/or QoL in later life. However, there is some research pointing to the positive effects of having completed vocational training in secondary school for later labor-enrollment (Falch & Nyhus, 2011). Not completing has a negative match with inactivity. Inactivity leads to poorer MH and QoL while to be employed is vital for both good MH and QoL (ibid.). Sikveland (2013: 572) points to negative expectations semi-openly communicated to youth with mental health illnesses in an article entitled: *“18 years and soon a disabled pensioner”*. This vulnerable group is easily forgotten and an outsider in the society, and also kept outside the labor market.

Based on the lack of former studies, and the context of one of the researcher's employment as a teacher in a school practicing a high level of adapted education, and thereby somehow easier access to informants with relevant experiences the following research question was focused on: *Some years after having completed adapted secondary education, (a) how do former*

*pupils assess their present status of MH and QoL, and (b) what aspects of the adapted education do they consider to have contributed positively to this status?*

### **Clarification of concepts**

In this paragraph we will explain the three key-concepts MH, QoL and adapted education generally and some of its particulars at VGS. Firstly, we look at MH as it is defined by World Health Organization (WHO, 2014):

*“Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make contribution to her or his community.”*

This definition is complex. To make it easier to grasp we introduced it to the informants by talking of its five sub-points. The individual:

1. Has a state of well-being
2. Is aware of his/her potential
3. Is able to cope with the normal stresses of life
4. Can work productively and fruitfully
5. Is able to make a contribution to her or his community.

By doing so we hoped that the concept validity would be better cared for. It is necessary because MH is a complex concept. WHO (2014) states that it is affected by cultural differences, and in many cases assessed and defined subjectively. Bøe et al., (2015: 169) adds that MH must be comprehended as more than the absence of mental diseases, and something more than an individual phenomenon. It also has to do with the relationship with other people as well as the society.

Secondly, the concept QoL is also hard to define precisely. WHO (1997) defines it like this: *“Quality of life is individuals’ perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns.”* We relate to this definition, but also to other professionals’ interpretations of the concept. Researchers have emphasized the experience of meaning as an essential element of high-leveled QoL (Keyes & Haidt, 2003; Gabrielsen, 2009). Gabrielsen (2009) also claims that good things like having one’s own children, a car, nice journeys and even a top career may not necessarily bring meaning to one’s life. Although the economic growth in Norway has doubled during the last 30 years, neither the level of happiness, nor the QoL has increased in the population (Næss et al., 2011). This fact shows, as Keyes (2006) has pointed out, that the concept of QoL has objective elements, relating to from outside parameters like income, level of education, health status, and age of living, but also a subjective element, which refers to the individual’s own perceived measures of what gives

him/her qualities. This means that the individual has a defining power to assign QoL to him-/herself according to what is important. Among subjective elements that are often positively mentioned by Norwegians are happiness, enjoyment of life, smiles, laughter, feeling of freedom and access to social aid when necessary (World Happiness Report 2015: 46). Næss et al., (2011: 18) break WHO's definition of QoL into five sub-points. To attain higher concept validity we introduced these sub-points to the informants in the beginning of the interviews:

- A. To feel fine
- B. To have good emotions
- C. To be satisfied with one's life
- D. To be free from bad emotions
- E. To have access to use one's abilities.

When talking with the informants we also explained that there is an overlap between the five sub-points of the two concepts MH and QoL.

Thirdly, the concept of adapted secondary education needs to be explained. Legally in Norway youths from the age of 16 have a right to three years of secondary education. This right must be utilized before they turn 24 (Act of Education, 1999, § 3-1; § 5-1). If a pupil has a need for special education, he/she has a right to receive it (Act of Education § 5-3). The county is responsible for organizing secondary education as well as adapted special education at this level. Particularly, VGS organizes such adapted special education and recruits pupils with this need, which have various reasons such as general learning disabilities, bullying at school, earlier drop-out-behavior, drug-addiction, inadequate home situations etc. VGS teaches smaller classes with usually 8-10 pupils compared to 15 in ordinary vocational classes at the public secondary schools. VGS complies with the standards of the national curriculum and participates in the same exams as the other secondary schools in the county.

Five out of 18 teachers are trained special needs educators. In addition craftsmen are employed to assist the training of particularly skilled professions. All the employees at VGS receive supervision from an external psychologist. Such external counseling helps the staff to get an outside perspective of their own work, and to analyze it critically in a way that improves the quality. It also benefits also the ways the staff cooperates. VGS has a special office for organizing apprenticeship training. Due to a thorough co-operation with the teachers the staff of this office knows the pupils well. They also know the companies and enterprises of the area, and are able to offer a close follow-up.

VGS has a slogan: A goal for all; all attain that goal. This is concretized: Headed towards a vocational certificate we wish for the pupils that they shall

- attain an improved self-image
- experience a sense of coping
- meet with adults who care

- receive an individually adapted timetable/teaching
- have a sober schooling
- encounter Christian values

In this article the three first sub-aims are considered relevant because they are closely related to the pupils' experienced MH and QoL.

## **Method**

A phenomenological, hermeneutic approach was selected due to the lack of former, systematic knowledge in the field. A qualitative interview was applied. A semi-structured interview guide was used, consisting of four major questions. This article focuses on questions (1) and (4), which states: (1) How do you assess your present status of MH and QoL on a scale from 1 to 10 (10 is the highest score)? And (4) what aspects of the adapted education do you consider to have contributed positively to this status?

We wanted to collect the informants' own descriptions and interpretations of their own experiences (Thagaard, 2013: 13). The guide was tested beforehand by interviewing two former pupils from different adapted classes than the three selected. Minor changes were made, but the test-interviews made the interviewer more conscious about the two main concepts MH and QoL, and prepared him for asking relevant follow-up questions during the real data collection.

As a warm-up for the topic interview the interviewer small talked with the informant about common experiences from the informant's days at VGS. Furthermore, the concepts of MH and QoL were explained by referring to the definitions by WHO, and talked through to attain a basic level of concept validity. The topical interviews varied in duration between 17 and 30 minutes. They were all recorded, all in all 212 minutes. The transcribed text consisted of 47 pages, and was written in formal Norwegian to avoid recognition of informants and VGS's geographical belonging. In addition some informant-statements from the informal smalltalk before and after the recorded part of the interviews were written down, like for instance the informants' personal data. The interviews were conducted between January and April 2015.

The informants were selected among former pupils of VGS. Strategically, pupils from the adapted classes of 2005, 2008 and 2011, a total of 27 pupils were selected. To get an impression of the experiences over some years and to avoid possible biases created by only one particular class these three classes were sampled. The 27 former pupils were contacted by a secretary at VGS. She sent a letter of consent to participate. This letter explained about the research project and its purposes. Six informants promptly replied yes, while three others consented to participate after a reminder. All in all nine former pupils were interviewed, five females and four males. This indicates an even gender

distribution. However, based on the fact that these classes mainly focus on health and social vocational subjects, and that there are generally a male-female ratio 1-4 between pupils, the gender representativeness is biased. The informants' age varied between 21 and 34 years. All, but one, lived in the municipality of the school, or the neighboring municipalities. Six of them were permanently employed, one worked as a substitute every now and then, one was an apprentice and one was examined for the purpose of a pension.

Considering the fact that only nine of 27 former pupils were willing to participate one might wonder what characterizes them compared to those 18 who never replied. There are reasons to believe that the willing informants are among those who have had some form of success in life since it was easy to reach them by postal letters, many of them are permanently employed, and they scored relatively quite high on question (1). If these considerations are right, one must conclude that the findings of this study point out aspects of adapted secondary education that are in particular perceived as relevant for pupils in adapted education that consider themselves quite successful in later life.

### **Analyses of transcribed material**

To gain a structure of the collected data *Systematic Text Condensation* (STC), inspired by Giorgi's phenomenological analysis (1985), modified by Malterud (2011), was applied. This approach is relevant when it comes to analyzing phenomena characterized by limited previous research, and spoken of by informants who are insiders of the investigated field. The aim is to develop new concepts and descriptions (Malterud, 2011). In this study a combination of editing analysis and quantitative content analyses was applied. The former consists of these main-steps (Malterud, 2011: 98-110):

- (1) Identifying significant general impressions. Related to the research question this means to look for expressions that described experiences from the pupil's days at VGS which contributed to his/her MH and QoL.
- (2) Identifying and coding significant units. The following units were established: Aspects related to (a) the staff; (b) the peer milieu of the class; (c) the feeling of safety and relational belonging; (d) the sense of coping; and (e) the period of apprenticeship.
- (3) Condensation. Statements belonging to each unit in (2) were selected and categorized together. During this assessment process one found that statements belonging to unit (c) were much related to staff-behavior. Subsequently this unit was merged with unit (a).
- (4) Summarization. The selected quotes were read in their true contexts one more time to check both the reliability and validity of their

belonging to the classified units. Some statements may, due to their complex content, have been double classified.

The quantitative analysis was applied first to the research question (a), the informants' subjective scaling of the pupils' experienced MH and QoL. Secondly, it was used to count the total number of statements related to research question (b), and to count the quotes belonging to each of the established units in main-step (2) above. All in all 68 statements were identified and categorized.

### **Ethical considerations**

Anonymity of the informants was attended through giving each informant a letter and number code. In the invitation letter to the potential informants it was made clear that participation was voluntary, and that it was possible to withdraw after signing the letter of consent, or any time later during the research process. The recorded conversations were immediately transcribed and thereafter deleted. The transcription was stored on a memory stick and an unlinked computer was used. The research project has been approved by Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD).

### **Findings and discussions**

This paragraph is divided in two. Part one presents the informants' scaled status of their experienced MH and QoL respectively. Part two focuses on aspects of how adapted education has contributed positively to these statuses.

**(a) How do former pupils assess their present status of their MH and QoL?** The subjectively assessed average score of MH for the nine informants was 7.6. Pupils from class 2008 scored quite evenly with an average of 9. The two other classes scored 7.3 (2005) and 6.0 (2011). The differences in average scores between genders was minimal, male 7.5 and female 7.6. Individually among the informants there was a variation between 3 and 10. The person who scored 3 explained that she had experienced a tough week at the time of the interview, while the one scoring 10 declared: *"I am permanently employed, have good friends around me, my own flat, and feel comfortable with what I am doing..."*. These comments show that the scoring depends on the informants' frame of mind and conditions at the time he/she was interviewed. This is in line with Nilsen who claims that most likely a qualitative study will not be completely replicable, deducing the same findings (Nilsen 2012: 141). The differences between the averages of the classes are according to the interviewer partly colored by the pupil in class 2011 scoring only 3, and partly by the spirit of the class 2008 in particular. He remembered this class as marked by its eagerness.

Regarding the scores of QoL they showed a more even distribution than the MH, both class by class and individually, but with slightly more discrepancy for gender, i.e. 8 for men and 7.4 for women. The class 2008 had an average score of 8 while the classes 2005 and 2011 scored 7 and 8 respectively. This gave an average of 7.7 for all the informants. Individually the scores varied between 6 and 9. However, more interesting is the fact that these informants appeared to have a similar average score as found among the general Norwegian population in a big European study (ESS). This study used a scale from 0 to 10 to assess how content people are with their lives. The summarized average in six surveys from 2002 to 2012 is 7.9 (Barstad, 2014: 274). If one considers contentment with life similar to QoL, it is logical to claim that the VGS informants reach the same emotional QoL as the average Norwegian population. Since we presume a considerable overlap between QoL and MH the same most likely applies to MH. The knowledge of the informants' background together with their own descriptive information connected to research question (b) - see below - tell us that the adapted secondary education at VGS may have contributed much to their present contentment with life. If this is so, it is a promising signal about the positive role of both adapted education and the idea of running special schools for marginalized pupils as an investment for better future lives for them as adults. However, one must remember that this was a sample of only nine people, and also that the sample may be biased, probably consisting of the more successful informants from the three selected classes. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to look for what aspects of the adapted education that these nine informants point out as important for both their present MH and QoL.

#### **(b) Aspects of adapted education contributing positively to MH and QoL**

Analyzing the informants' statements resulted in four main aspects that we present one by one, combining MH and QoL quotations.

##### **The impact of staff's attitudes and relationship-building competence**

All nine informants related to this aspect in a total of 31 statements. This shows that the attitudes and behavior of the staff seemed to have a high impact on the informants' subjectively reported MH and QoL. Typical statements are (concepts underlined by us):

- a) **Attitudes:** *"To be met with such understanding and faith shows that you (the staff) respected us"; "He was very clever in understanding (me)"; "... Class master and other teachers showed that you cared for us"; "You became a friend (with the teachers)", i.e. friendliness; "The key word is patience"; "... Was met by a positive person in the morning", i.e. positivity.*
- b) **Behavior:** *"You were at school not only to teach us, but to be social, as well"; "Was greeted with "Good morning" from everybody";*



*“... You used time to talk to us as well”; “He sat down and talked to the pupils to grasp what they meant”; “We were seen both as a class and as an individual”; “It was ok to ask questions without a feeling of being interpreted as silly”; “You helped me extremely much”; “The teachers helped any time whether it was working hours or leisure time, or the issue related to subjects or personal needs”.*

The quotations show that there is a link between the attitudes of the staff and the behavior they exposed. They refer to characteristics that commonly apply to the staff as a good manner of practice. In some quotations informants relate to teachers, in others to menial staff, advisors, etc. A reasonable interpretation of this is that the staff jointly abides with the slogan/goal of VGS, one goal for all, and all (should be helped) to attain that goal. Moreover, there are quotations which clearly match with the sub-aims. For example to attain an improved self-image and meet with adults who care are underlined by statements like *“to be met with such understanding and faith shows that you (the staff) respected us”*; and *“Class master and other teachers showed that you cared for us.”* To experience a sense of coping is also emphasized in quotations like *“It was ok to ask questions without a feeling of being interpreted as silly”*; and *“You helped me extremely much.”* Didactically speaking, the “correlation” between the intentional and planned curriculum of VGS, the curriculum exposed by the staff, and the curriculum grasped and spoken of by these nine pupils is quite explicit (cf. Goodlad, 1979). This shows that the VGS’s didactical philosophy penetrates to all the actors of VGS-campus. To reach such accordance within a staff is quite outstanding. However, in many cases this is desirable because it is in the line with research. Studies imply that qualitatively good didactical guidelines permeating both the attitudes and behavior of the school-management, the teachers and other members of the staff, have a protective impact on the pupils’ MH (Nordahl & Manger, 2005: 99). Support from teachers in particular is a significant contributive factor (Helland & Mathiesen, 2009: 50; Federici & Skaalvik 2013: 58).

Quotations like *“...to be met with ... faith”* and *“... you believed I was able to something”* yields support to the research of Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) about the Pygmalion effect. It claims that pupils’ performance was influenced by teachers’ positive expectations towards them. As stated by Nordahl & Manger, (2011: 99) explicit, concurred and realistic expectations towards pupils’ behavior and coping promote their development and MH. Although the reliability of the Pygmalion-effect is discussed, it is clear that the above quotations add support to the idea. Moreover, this knowledge is also related to the pupils’ social and safety needs (Maslow, 1987). Citations like *“You became a friend with the teachers. You were admitted to the teachers, the same way you admitted them”*; *“You employees were always available”*; and *“I knew that you*

*the staff were approachable, irrespective of anything*” imply very safe relation and confident terms between the pupils and the staff. This finding is supported by other research. It states that the terms between teachers and pupils are important for the pupils’ learning outcomes, the quality of their emotional development, and how they see the school (Federici & Skaalvik, 2013: 58; Murberg & Bru, 2009).

The danger in such whole day massive availability to the pupils is that it may cause burn-out in the long run. Subsequently, the staff must protect themselves from being invaded by the pupils. VGS care for this challenge by offering the staff periodic counseling by an external psychologist where this theme is handled every now and then. However, this study shows beyond any doubt that the staff’s exertions in form of showing positive attitudes and friendly behavior pay off. The informants are satisfied, and most likely experience improved MH and QoL both during their days at school and in their future life. Such feedback may provide the staff with energy to continuously give the little extra like always greeting the pupils with a friendly “Good morning”, taking time to listen to them and commend both their school progress and social behavior. This study seems to underpin the old slogan that “tiny things make a difference”.

### **The peer milieu of the class**

All nine informants related to this aspect too in a total of 21 statements. This indicates that a high quality peer milieu in the class is vital for promoting good MH and QoL in these pupils’ later life as adults. Table 1 refers to particularly contributing sub aspects with corresponding quotations.

**Table 1 Sub-aspects and quotations of peer milieu contributing to pupils’ MH and QoL**

<b>Sub-aspects contributing to MH – QoL</b>	<b>Citations</b>
(1) Tiny things in everyday life like <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Common breakfast, small talk</li> <li>• Having fun and feeling contentment and belonging</li> <li>• Getting friends/developing friendship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>It was very good to be fetched, eating breakfast, talking, a pleasant start of the day</i></li> <li>• <i>We had breakfast every morning</i></li> <li>• <i>Contentment meant a lot. We had fun together</i></li> <li>• <i>Contentment with the peers of your class</i></li> <li>• <i>Here I got some friends.</i></li> <li>• <i>I remember particularly two. I was much together with them.</i></li> <li>• <i>I felt we were good friends all of us.</i></li> <li>• <i>I still meet with some people from the class.</i></li> </ul>

(2) Special events like the class-trips	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Trips. All the journeys were very positive.</i></li> <li>• <i>The trips made me feel that this is my class</i></li> <li>• <i>The trips ... made a companionship among us</i></li> <li>• <i>The trips we made (various destinations mentioned)</i></li> </ul>
(3) The general VGS environment has existential life-changing impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The school environment was so important to me. It changed my life in a way</i></li> <li>• <i>I was bullied for ten years before I came here</i></li> <li>• <i>At this VGS I found myself somehow normal</i></li> </ul>

Primarily, one notices that the tiny everyday things were mentioned as important by many informants. Again this emphasizes the conclusive remark in the paragraph above, the impact of tiny differences. This is in accordance with other researchers' findings. Skatvedt & Schou (2010) write about the potential of the commonplaces, and the beauty of the commonplaces (Skatvedt & Schou, 2008). Topor (2004) emphasizes the impact of the tiny elements of everyday life. The importance of a good peer-milieu also relates to Bøe et al.,'s underlining (2015) that the definition of MH deals also with relationships to other people. Moreover, one may see a connection between point (1) and (3) in table 1, i.e. that the sum of tiny things may cause crucial, existential changes in people's life. For a school like VGS and its staff the reading of such quotations is encouraging. Small, extra, possibly unnoticed, deeds seem to be very important and providing a safe and secure foothold in some pupils' existence. Secondly, the journeys mentioned as point 2 in table 1 are highly appreciated by the pupils and appear to have contributed to healthy per building companionship. The staff gets an expressed proof of how strenuous class-trips with young people pay off. Generally, these findings are supported by other scholars who emphasize the significance of having peers as friends at school (Imsen, 2010: 145; Nordahl & Manger, 2005: 99; Webster-Stratton, 2007: 170).

### **Period of apprenticeship**

Six informants speak of this, in nine statements. The quotations relates to two major experiences. Firstly, about the apprentices' good emotions like: *"To help people, in particular children ..., gives me a feeling of doing something"*; *"I feel it matters for those (clients) that I am present"*; *"...it mattered enormously to me"*; and *"It was a very good period with much contentment"*. Secondly, the significance of supervision is highlighted: *"I received a lot of support..., also by very clever supervisors from the training office"*; *"The*

*follow-up I received as an apprentice was very good”; and “I had very good supervision from other colleagues of mine.”*

These statements are in accordance with both signals in public white-papers and research. White-paper (St. meld.) no 44 (2008-2009: 32-37) emphasizes the importance of offering young people a complete and continuous training scheme to obtain vocational certificates, not least to those with special needs, as the pupils at VGS. The alternative is often drop-out with a subsequent poorer MH and QoL and probably also various forms of abuse and addiction, cf. the worries of Norwegian Ministers of Education mentioned in the introduction. Lunde (2013: 19) claims that young people outside school, labor or conscription assess their health to be comparatively poorer than that of their peers. The connection between good MH and QoL and being employed is also obvious, cf. the definitions sub-points like: “Can work productively and fruitfully”; “is able to make a contribution to her/his community”; and “to have access to use one’s abilities”. Not least the quotations related to good emotions find their “counterparts” in the QoL-definition, cf. items A to D. The reported experiences with supervision of high quality indicate that VGS here attains its sub-goal that the pupils should “meet with adults who care”. The same seems to apply to the enterprises offering apprenticeships.

### **Experiences a feeling of coping**

This aspect, which is one of the main goals of VGS, was mentioned by four informants, in six statements. Quotations related to a feeling of coping can be grouped in two major categories:

(a) The fact that the pupil had received a visible certificate of accomplishing something, like completing secondary education and/or an apprenticeship, cf. citations like *“This is probably the first issue I have achieved, which is proved by papers”*; and *“I have obtained a certificate of completed apprenticeship, and I find it very satisfactory.”* It is not surprising that to have such a certificate is highly valued by these informants since a certificate and documentation is a gate opener to the labor market in a modern society. Work, in the next turn, means status, something which often has improved and good MH and QoL as its normal outcome. Nordahl & Manger (2005: 99) underlines that *“Abundance of possibilities for pupils to cope is a preventive factor in their lives.”*

(b) The experiences of being verbally praised and boasted of by significant others, cf. quotations like *“They (my colleagues) say that I am very clever”*; and *“At work I feel I accomplish well, there I receive a lot of praise.”* Nordahl &

Manger (2005:215) also emphasizes the importance of giving pupils' positive feedback whenever they accomplish something well.

### **An illustrative conclusion**

There is obviously a link between the four aspects referred to by the informants. To summarize the findings and to illustrate links we have constructed a model consisting of squares, see fig. 1. Square A relates to the educational philosophy and targets of VGS, square B to E to the four aspects mentioned by the informants, cf. research question (b), and square F to the measured outcomes of the educational efforts done by the VGS, related to the subjectively scored MH and QoL, cf. research question (a). F also refers to the average score in surveys of Norwegians' scaled life contentment, as reported by Barstad (2014).

The influence from square A on the squares below is not considered surprising. All serious educational institutions believe to a great extent in management by objectives. The particulars of this study are that it looks at outcomes seldom evaluated in schools: the pupils' subjectively reported level of MH and QoL, and that this is looked at retrospectively. Moreover, they also speak of what parts of the school program that promote these qualities. However, one should be careful with generalizing the results to other samples of secondary school pupils, both because VGS practices special needs education and thereby has extra resources, and because it is based on religious and temperance values. Lastly, the use of a qualitative method means that the study is, in its nature, not generalizable – not least when the number of informants is only nine. Nevertheless, the aspects described as outcomes of the study (frames B to E) are compatible with what scholars point out as essential factors leading to both positive MH and QoL (Bøe & Ulland, 2012, Næss et al., 2011, Nordahl & Manger, 2005).

Regarding the reliability of the informants' descriptions one should remember that informants looking back into the past may have forgotten negative incidences and enlarged positive issues, cf. the slogan "memory idyllizes". We also know that it can be hard to separate events from particular factors. However, figure 1 illustrates interrelationships which ought to be educationally promising: VGS has meant a lot and accomplished much in the nine informants' life regarding their MH and QoL. Concrete elements of the educational approaches have been pointed out as vital for developing good MH and QoL. To go on practicing these elements appears, based on this study, to be promising.

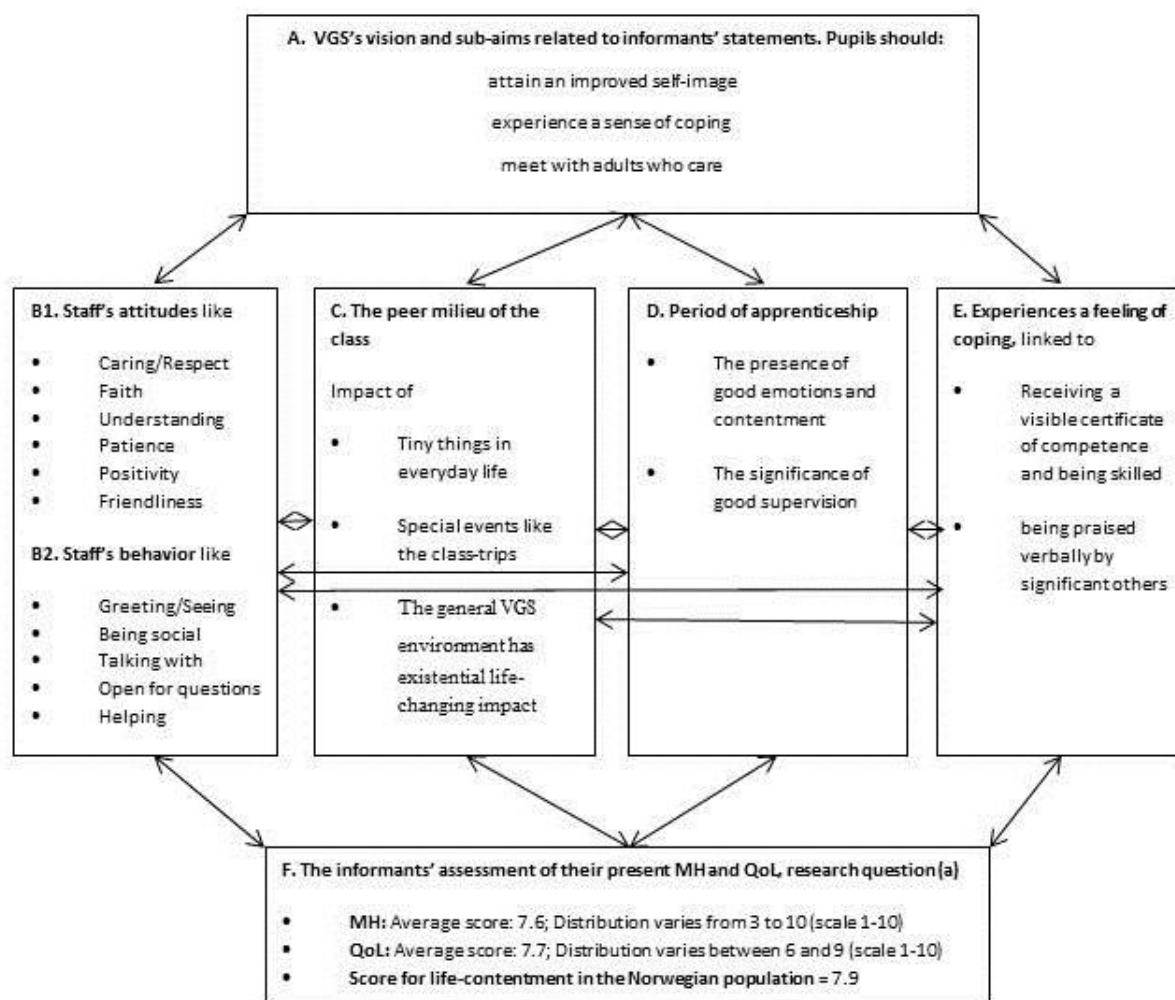


Figure 1 A constructed visualization of the main results of the study. Frame A describes some aims of VGS, the school where the pupils were educated. Frames B to E describe sub-aspects of the school's activities that contributed to the MH and QoL - research question (b). The average scores, cf. research question (a), are related in frame F.

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