YOUNG PEOPLE'S STORIES OF SCHOOL FAILURE AND REMEDIAL TRAJECTORIES –
CLUES TO PREVENTION OF SCHOOL ABSENTEEISM AND EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

ÅSA SUNDELIN, STOCKHOLM UNIVERSITY, SWEDEN

JOAKIM LINDGREN, UMEÅ UNIVERSITY, SWEDEN

LISBETH LUNDAHL, UMEÅ UNIVERSITY, SWEDEN

BACKGROUND

The article emanates from the research project "Moving on"

- Educational transitions, trajectories and support to
  - Young people leaving compulsory school lacking eligibility for a 3-year program in Sweden (≈15 percent of all 9th graders in 2021/22)
  - The Individual Alternative (IA):
    - a Swedish remedial program
    - aim to help non-completers of compulsory school acquire eligibility for upper secondary education (USE) and/or become prepared for work.

NEVERTHELESS,

Many of the interviewed students at IA

- described having had frequent or prolonged absenteeism in compulsory school due to social, health, and/or learning problems

- reported a disengagement in compulsory school, which can be regarded as a type of mental absence (cf. Kearney & Gonzalvez, 2022).

- Teachers and career counselors testified that previous problematic school absenteeism was a very common feature of the IA students' histories.

AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

to increase knowledge of possible approaches for promoting school attendance and minimizing ESL by listening to young peoples accounts of experiences of the IA remedial program and preceding educational trajectories.

I. How do compulsory school students and IA students describe their educational trajectories and their expectations of the IA before entering the program or being at risk of doing so?

II. What experiences of supportive and non-supportive aspects of the IA do students describe during and after attending the program?

III. What are the implications of the answers to RQs I-II for counteracting school absenteeism and early school leaving?

EMPIRICAL MATERIAL

Three sets of interviews were conducted 2018-2020:

- 16 ninth grade students who were likely to be referred to the IA

- 22 students at IA

- Follow-up interviews two years later with 11 of these 22 students

THEORETICAL APPROACH

- sociological concepts such as *careership* (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997) and *trajectory* (Walther et al., 2015).
  - School experience to result from interactions between structural factors and agency, involving both pragmatic-rational decision-making (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997) and emotions (Barbalet, 2001).

- understand the ecology of school attendance and absenteeism through localized and biographical perspectives (Kearney & Gonzalvez, 2022).

- Theories of self-worth protection (Covington, 1984) regarding understanding school attendance and absenteeism.

"My own fault"

… it's completely my fault, there's no one else I can blame. (–) My teachers, everyone has tried everything. It's just, if I don't feel like it, I won't do it. I'm pretty bad, can't remember what the word is called, bad trait. I only do things I feel like. (Dani, Commuter Compulsory School 1)

A Shameful and Uncertain Trajectory

I thought it was embarrassing to start on the IA. It was like everyone else got into a national program. (–) Yes, I thought from the beginning when I started, that this is the end. Kind of almost gave up when I didn't pass the 9th grade. (Julia, Small City Upper Secondary School 2)

IA as a turning point

Fantastic people all of them. (–) Classmates and everything, they are all friendly. (–) The teachers are important, that they are supportive and (...) can respect other people. (Henrik, Commuter Upper Secondary School 2)

IA AS A TURNING POINT

- smallgroup instruction,
- teaching adapted to their individual needs and abilities,
- relationships with the teachers, other staff, and classmates.
- teachers' empathic understanding of how it feels to have school difficulties and being unable to meet school requirements (emotional support)
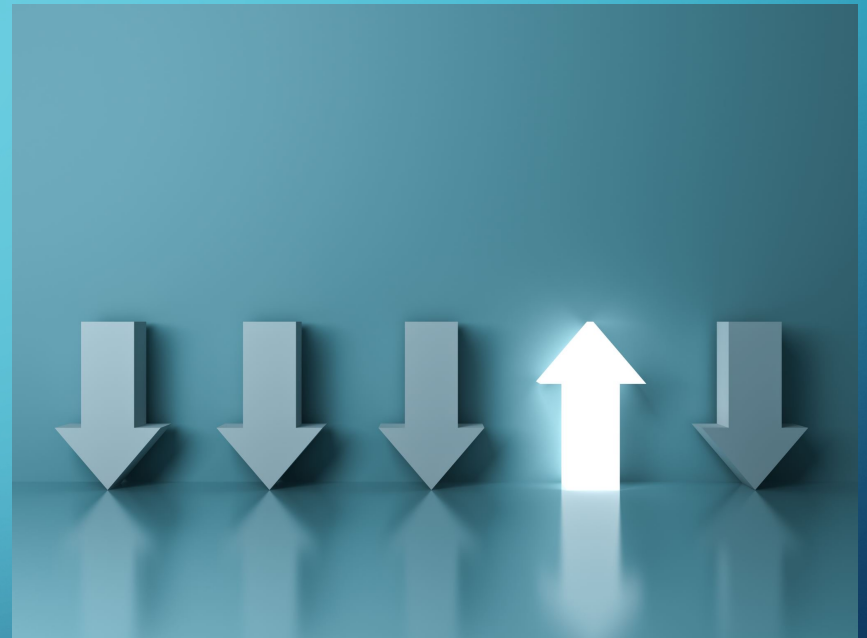
Maria and Erik understand me, they have dealt with me since I started, they understand when it becomes too much and I start to give up, that they should not put too much pressure on me.

(Orvar, Rural Upper Secondary school 1)

Our findings from interviewing IA students are well aligned with research reviews regarding important factors for helping students to stay in or return to school

(Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Keppens & Spruyt, 2020; Nouwen et al., 2016; O'Gorman et al., 2016).

- individually adapted learning environment

- engaged and supportive socio-emotional space

- partnership with parents and other stakeholders

- and a holistic approach

SOME FINAL WORDS

- The students' narratives indicate that school's ability to instill feelings of belonging are crucial for regaining study motivation and self-confidence as learners and social beings in school (cf. Covington, 1984).

- It is essential both to strengthen measures to help young people feel safe and succeed in compulsory school and to import supportive mechanisms from the IA into mainstream upper secondary programs. This is important not only to prevent absenteeism and ESL, but also to maintain and strengthen young people's beliefs in themselves as capable life-long learners and citizens.